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A TIME TO KILL

A TIME TO KILL

Two Stories

BY

ALEC BROWN

'A time to kill, and a time to heal'
Ecclesiastes, iii, 3.

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A TIME TO KILL

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A TIME TO KILL

I

As he stood, pausing a minute in his work, beside his wife in the garden, Hugh Garner found his fingers pressing painfully, crushing the handle of the spade in a frenzied grip.

The fresh, dry wind and the sun had marked all but the last few spits he had dug with dryness, as if the brown stuff had been salted. The soft, upturned soil was already growing hard. Hugh Garner seemed to be eyeing his work, but it was the steel blade that held his straining eyes. With a sensation of congestion, as if he were choking, he stared at the shining steel with hot, dull alarm. For a dizzy moment he had felt within himself an intoxicating power – to swing that garden tool above his head, and bring the oblong blade crashing through her fine, wavy, auburn hair, smashing through that head so nicely poised on its china-fragile connecting neck.

And then it passed. The moment slipped away, and he was left there, a little chill, left alone with his wife, the brown garden frosted with crumbs of the lighter drying loam, and his fingers clenching white on the smooth wood.

He looked at her.

He was thirty-eight; she was thirty-two. They had been married seven years, seven suave years. They were a happy couple, they were well-matched, they had a sturdy son, they had their amusements, they had their bucolic bliss in their garden.

'And here,' she said, 'we'll have a mass of rhododendrons.'

'That's an excellent scheme,' he said, while he stared at the bloody, clotted blade he could still perceive, with its untidy fringe of clinging hair.

. . . . . .

She lay at his feet, on the drying whitish soil, and her blood was already trickling on to that surface crust the wind so quickly made, and remoistening it. He was breathing a little hard, as if from the imagined effort; and so that no one of the outer world should know or hear, between the garden and the road, between the garden and the peeping windows of the upper rooms, between the murder and the air that picked up her horrified, choking shriek with lissom fingers, there rose high a protecting wall of the flaming spring sun.

. . . . . .

Madness, he said to himself, insanity. The blood seemed to be pounding in his brain in his sudden fit of unbearable exasperation. He thrust the spade into the loose dug soil and they walked arm in arm down the path and back, replanning the old garden, which did not please them as it stood.

They had been married seven years. Everybody who saw them said behind their backs how well-matched they were.

When he wakened in the morning there was always a cup of tea, always the same, a solid Indian sort, ready at his side. The house and its comforts were accomplished smoothly. She was a good housekeeper.

So they walked through the garden, Hugh and Lilian Garner, and bit by bit, as he discussed paths and beds and bulbs and seedlings with her, and glanced at times at her neat small, glossy head, the momentary madness receded in the distance, and the scene that fit of madness had placed between them in his mind receded, farther and farther in the distance, mercifully fainter in the haze of the early May afternoon. On the lawn in front of the house they sat down on the old granite roller. After a minute or two the chill struck through their clothes. But just as they were about to move there was a clattering in the house, a door flew open, and a small figure

came bounding and stumbling towards them, with cries of delight. Their son John was growing almost as they looked at him; sweeping, with the fluent ease of childhood, towards his sixth birthday.

The boy stood between them. Hugh put an arm, a little awkwardly, round his neck.

'Well, and what have you been doing to-day, old man?' he asked.

His voice fell flat and a little dull on his ears. The bright story of the boy's daily tasks, adventures and tribulations began, a broken dramatic recitative, to which Lilian, who knew it all already, served as explanatory, guiding, consecutive lyric orchestra. Hugh smiled as he listened, but still that fit of madness hovered against him like a cloud on the horizon. He tried to persuade himself it was blood pressure caused it – he resolved never again to work in the sun in the afternoon after a heavy lunch. Putting it down to that eased his mind.

'One or two eggs,' she would ask, day after day, at breakfast, or 'another sausage,' or whatever else it was. Then, 'two, of course,' or 'of course you'll have another,' she would say, and then perhaps use her other breakfast remark, 'you're not eating enough.'

She wheedled, fussily. Later, as he left the house, she would not fail to see him go, smooth the collar of his overcoat.

Lapped in her kindness, again and again, like a tired man drowning in a warm southern sea, he found himself relinquishing all effort. Not only did he thank her for her attentions and bid her farewell tenderly, but with unnecessary fulsomeness for which he hated himself, he opened every time another and another secret door to his inner self. He divided all his petty thoughts and doings with her. And for long enough he had felt in this some debasement of their life together.

'The Coventrys are coming to dinner, remember,' she said, as he left the house the day after that awful moment, in the garden, when the first intimation of violence came to him.

'I hadn't forgotten,' he said. 'Nothing I can bring from town? All the flowers you want?'

'Nothing,' she said. 'That's not for you to worry about, my dear. Only bring yourself safe and sound.'

Her fingers, on his arm, pressed it firmly. There was pleading in her voice.

He smiled at her. 'I shall bring myself,' he said, 'in not less than five thousand little pieces, not even nicely dried, but freshly cut and dripping.'

'Ghoul!' she cried. 'Hugh, you're horrible!'

But she still held his arm. They were nearly at the road, at the bottom of their long garden. As he turned to go she gave him one last firm squeeze.

'Safe and sound,' she urged, in a lower tone.

He saw again that she could hardly believe in play. She wanted, by mere words, to make it quite clear before he went that he really would come; and because there was complete loyalty in his heart he always felt a slight resentment at this.

He could not quite find out from himself why he resented it. It was not even because her somewhat spaniel-like insistence tied him down. He could only remember feeling the same sensation when buttonholed and drawn to a nose to nose talk or prodded by a fat forefinger in tiresome business conversations with inferiors. Yet the comparison did not seem to him then to fit, and he rejected it.

'Safe and sound,' he heard his own voice, hearty. 'In fact, if you'll admit I'm not a ghoul I'll promise to come in one piece only.'

As he let in the clutch and glided off he held up one finger and waved at her, and she was more than satisfied. So easily it was done. Yet he felt vaguely that something was not as it should be if love had to be dressed in such play acting.

II

THE short drive to his office, in the main street of the provincial town near which they lived, passed in its usual half-slumber. He eyed the ribbon unwinding and spreading, the ribbon of white road rushing at him and under the nose of his car, with drowsy eyes, and in the half-dream in which he luxuriated in the clean breakfast settling sensations within him, his thoughts played with the business he had in hand – particularly with the tiresomely tied-up legacies of a prosperous local builder and contractor who had just died. Yet it was an ill wind after all, because though it was likely to cause him far more work than it was really worth to him the whole business had the good point in it that it would take them up to town in about six weeks.

At least it would take him. He could go alone. But she, Lilian, would go with him as a matter of course. A matter of course – mere habit – after what was, he had to admit, comparatively little life together? As he swung into the half mile of broad, straight, shining road that ended his daily journey to work he smiled, as he realized how honestly he could tell himself that it was no mere matter of habit. If there was any habit in their life together it was habit of their house and their garden. Going away together, the prospect of theatres, picture galleries, her shopping, of a holiday of exactly the sort they needed, a little of the metropolis after a surfeit of country and sea, was almost like a new adventure.

He did not give himself full count at the moment of what that qualifying almost might mean.

At the garage, a moment later, he met Jenkinson, one of the directors of the iron foundries at Rickton. Jenkinson waved his hand at him and called good-morning across the

garage yard to him, Jenkinson was very different from what he himself was.

They strolled together along the High Street towards their respective offices, wrangling, as they nearly always did, like good friends–to-day about representative government. Hugh Garner had been brought up as one of those conservatives of which England is full who are more liberal than many a true liberal. He had been trained too to direct his thoughts in the balanced way of the lawyer, and he was always ready to defend the institution of Parliament. What interested him was not the popular question, which he regarded as absurd – whether there was any sense at all in representative government – but the way in which the friendly constructive debate of a number of individuals could be made to survive in the presence of three more or less equal factions.

Jenkinson, on the other hand, though a man of just about his age and brought up in much the same way, was more and more inclined to be sceptical of the whole thing. Once, he said, the debate had developed into two parties, even if only two parties, it was begging the whole question for it to be called a debate.

. . . . . .

'It involves inevitable hypocrisy, too,' Jenkinson said, 'because since at the best two parties mean two distinctly opposed opinions there cannot be constructive unity in the thing without hypocrisy on the one side or other in every decision.'

'Come,' Garner protested. 'Isn't that too sweeping a word?'

'What would you say, then? Without legal hair-splitting, I mean?'

'Well, obviously one or both sides will, if they really want a sound decision, allow a touch of compromise.'

'Which I call hypocrisy,' Jenkinson said, very shortly. 'Most compromise is hypocrisy, and, if you like things built on hypocrisy you are welcome to your Parliament.'

'Don't be ridiculous, Jenkinson,' Garner protested. 'It is not hypocrisy to want a working settlement of a difficult question and to be willing to pay for it. Hypocrisy is. . . .'

Jenkinson laughed.

'Well, what is it?' he asked.

'I should say it was telling or acting the same sort of lie for purely personal advantage that, according to you, must be acted or told by any man who accepts compromise in Parliament. A compromise is a concession based on mutual interest, and hypocrisy – yes, that's the distinction, I think – hypocrisy is based on the purely personal interest of one person only.'

They had reached his offices.

'A fine lawyer's distinction,' Jenkinson laughed after him as he went through the open doorway. He turned and waved his hand jovially and shouted back.

'A very good definition, all the same, my dear Jenkinson.'

He heard Jenkinson booming out 'careful you don't get wrecked on your own dividing line' as he pushed open the outer door of his offices, on the first floor up, and went in.

Work immediately absorbed him, a pile of correspondence from over the week-end was waiting for him, and his argument with Jenkinson passed from his mind.

III

THE morning business confirmed his hopes. In about six weeks a visit to town would be necessary. He confirmed his resolve to make a holiday of it, and to insist on Lilian's going with him. Would she not there, free of house and child, be more the self she once had been; would not a little of – of unmatronly recklessness come into her behaviour? Would she not, far from the small circle of their acquaintance, to criticize and gape, drain a bottle of wine with him in some soft-carpeted fan-swept restaurant? Since for so long they had dined, whether alone or with guests, in respectable restraint in the chaste oaken calm of their own dining-room.

His thoughts slightly disturbed him, even though he had lately grown accustomed to allowing himself to half-visualize one or another petty desire. 'Come,' he said now to himself, 'surely I do not feel that antithesis!' He reflected that before lunch he was too lazy to think out all he meant by respectable. 'But obviously,' – he shook his head – 'I do not mean that I think Lilian falsely respectable.' Obviously, indeed, he did not want her, dining with him in town as he was planning, to be loose.

Yet 'Be honest, now, with yourself!' he thought as he strolled along to the garage for his car. What was then the conclusion? Worse than ever – that she is really respectable, and respectable is, well, out with it, stuffy, decorous, and then the thought was out again – hypocritical.

'And then the conclusion is I hate it. I am. . . .'

But he carefully stopped short there, with a shutting off of thought that he was half aware had become a habit. It was only that morning's argument about hypocrisy with Jenkinson

that had this time brought him so near to blurting out his inner thought.

And thought of Jenkinson led him to thinking of how Jenkinson, confirmed bachelor, managed those things. One of their acquaintances had met Jenkinson out in Prague.

'Jenkinson knows how to look after himself,' he had said.

Those were his words. Who was it? Why, it was no other than Coventry, dining that evening with them. Yes, Coventry who had said Jenkinson knew how to look after himself with a leer and a wink that had sent a subdued ribald guffaw rippling round the little group of men standing beside one of the nets at the county tournament last summer. What were Coventry's exact words? Oh, yes, a Polish girl he had thought she was, – always about with him.

But 'if I know Jenkinson it'll be another one next year.'

There, indeed, was the contrast; not only between himself and Jenkinson, but also between Coventry and Jenkinson; because Coventry, also a man of thirty-five to forty, was married in exactly the same way as Garner was, – to a good-looking, even pretty, loving, pure, respectable (the word would slip in), Englishwoman. Coventry too had children, a pair of fine boys, Coventry too made a just comfortable income, had a pleasant home, all the home calm, pleasures and comforts he could want, as he himself had.

Whereas Jenkinson. . . .

And he tried to imagine what Jenkinson's way of life would be. A bachelor establishment, with a cook and a housekeeper. Why shouldn't he be delightfully comfortable? 'But it's not the same thing,' it is incomplete, he assured himself. Why? A household of servants without a woman's head over them never gave a man the comfort. . . . But that again was not it; an Englishman is not quite a German, marrying a housekeeper.

It was the loneliness, – though there again so many months of Jenkinson's life were spent abroad, and they, according to Coventry, were far from lonely. No household worries, no waste of energy on children, just living for each other, man and woman. . . .

But he reached the garage. Damn it all, what a backboneless way of carrying on it was, something cried within him; and yet it was hard enough to think of backboneless traits in Jenkinson. There, indeed, was the man smiling in front of him, he too come for his car; a tall fellow, topping six foot, with a military carriage. Open, straight, wide-set eyes, thinnish lips, hair already streaked with grey; not a trace of moral weakness in the face; and everyone knew him as a model of integrity.

'Do you run down to your place every day for lunch now?' Jenkinson asked him. 'Lucky dog! You're not a homeless bounder.'

As if specially prompted he had answered Garner's very inner thoughts.

'Look at me,' he went on, 'off to a lonely collation at the club, and thank your stars you are married.'

Garner was taken aback. He did not like that feeling of having his thoughts read.

'As it happens,' he replied, 'I'm not going out to-day. I've some business over at Little Blaydon. Old Heathcote wants his will revised, and I promised I'd run over to lunch with him. How that old fellow hangs on to life!'

'Happily married,' laughed Jenkinson, 'that's why. The old woman's looked after him well, and still does!'

'Well, if that's the only reason you have for envying us I must admit you show little enough hyprocrisy in your bachelordom. But why not instal a nurse for yourself at once? Take one on as a probationer now and she'll be just

ready to look after you when you come to Heathcote's years!'

'Laugh, my dear Garner, as much as you like,' Jenkinson said quietly, but seriously, 'you married men rarely realize your fortune.'

'I assure you we do.'

'Then you keep it very dark.'

Garner started his car. Its gentle whirr answered Jenkinson better than he could have done. It concealed for him a sudden confused feeling of guilt. At heart Garner was a very simple honest man. He felt at a loss because he was afraid lest he had shown Jenkinson a doubt in the wiseness of the marriage he had made.

Jenkinson's car too began its oily purring. The garage boy went to the entrance to see if the way was clear. He waved back to them.

'We can afford to keep it dark,' Garner called across to Jenkinson.

He had recovered himself. Jenkinson good-naturedly waved a gloved hand to him to get out first. It was as if he dismissed a child, thought Garner, as he gave a perfunctory flick of his hand to reply to the condescension of the other. He let in his clutch and glided out into the road, round to the right and away towards Little Blaydon.

IV

A YEAR later, another spring, Hugh Garner and his wife Lilian worked, strolled, played in their garden, as they had strolled, played, worked in their garden, arranging flowers and colour schemes leisurely, sweetly and exquisitely seven times, seven springs, before.

'And here,' Lilian said, 'I would like to turn the paths the other way and fill this corner with sweet herbs and tiny flowering things and then make a rockery over there in the very corner. It would be so sweet and cool.'

'Yes,' Hugh said, 'but how will you get enough water for a good rockery up in that corner?'

He did not like rockeries, and for all he could see the present arrangement of the paths and the flowers (which had been thought perfection by her the year before), was good enough.

'Couldn't we have a pipe laid on? Just running water, a trickle in the hottest part of the day in July and August is the most we'd want constantly running.'

'Hm!' was all Hugh answered.

'Well, dear, if it can't be done. . . .'

'But, Lilian, I didn't say it can't be done. Of course it can. Look!'

Over anxious to dissemble the annoyance he could see he had for the moment shown, he took a rake and began to trace on the ground a rough scheme of how it might be done.

'You see,' he concluded, 'about seven yards of piping is all we should need. You're sure that's the corner you would like it in?'

'Don't, dear,' she said, 'talk to me about your nasty

mechanics and your pipes and all those things. It makes my head whirl.'

She squeezed his arm.

'I was only supposing,' she said, 'only suggesting what might be done. We might see some other time. . . .'

The sly ease with which, for peace and love (if that was love), she withdrew what he was sure was a real longing annoyed him. It annoyed him partly because he had failed, for a brief moment, but sufficient for her to notice, in the game of give and take, and now he began to fight for the rockery that a few minutes before he had wanted to dismiss from thought for ever. The charm of it, oozing trickling, sparkling water in summer among water-loving plants, succulent and green, as if there was a natural spring in their garden, all from a pipe cunningly laid on, warmed him. He insisted.

'It's so easy,' he said, and once more he went into technical explanations of the simplest kind. 'Old Neave could manage it with a plumber to come and fit the piping.'

Old Neave was an old man in the village who gardened for them and cleaned the car at irregular intervals. He was one of those really handy old men.

But as Hugh went deeper and deeper into the realization of her rockery he could see, when he glanced aside at her from time to time, that she was set in her sweet, mulish compromise. With a quite motherly concern she seemed to have made up her mind, however great his enthusiasm became, not to allow him to waste himself on a thing he did not want to do. But, of course, the more he noticed this, the more he laid himself out to do her pleasure, even trying to wheedle her into accepting the rockery as a sort of present.

However ridiculous it might be, the rockery altercation began to assume enormous dimensions. The loving argument

became almost a fight. The maid Jenny had already begun to arrange teacups and all the paraphernalia of afternoon tea in England under the mulberry tree on the lawn. They went on with their mulish struggle. Lilian was crying, 'Why should I be bullied into carrying out what was only a passing suggestion?' and Hugh was averring what he knew to be true, that the thing was deep in her heart, dear to her heart. And therefore she should have it, and he told himself that it would be monstrous selfishness if through his indifference to rockeries her little desire were thwarted.

It was a situation that was common enough now in the Garner household, and their maid smiled scarcely perceptibly, a sweet, happy smile, as she tinkled the little silver bell to tell them the tea had been brought and there was nothing more to do but to come and take one more gentle delight, eating the frail succulent sandwiches she had prepared with such pride.

. . . . . .

'It's a real pleasure, cook,' she said when she got back to the kitchen, 'to be in a house where master and mistress live happy together; there's love there and no mistake, and all the chances they want to enjoy it as comfortable off as they are.'

'What are they a-doin' now?' asked the cook.

'They're a-playin' at squabblin' like a couple of ten-year-olds. She wants to have a rockery, but she's pretendin' no she doesn't because she thinks he thinks it's an unnecessary expense.'

'What, a rockery? I call that stingy. . . .'

'No, but the layin'-on of the water for it.'

'Now, that is an expense,' said the cook.

'And he can see that she feels it is, and so he's a-tryin' to make her have it. It's a real treat to watch them.' Jenny looked on her master and mistress in the servants' proper

way – much as people who keep a dovecote look with beatitude on the stupid billing, cooing birds.

But however much it was a treat to the maid to watch him and Lilian covertly wrangling, Hugh Garner, as he sat and munched a cake, cursed his lot. It was with a curious feeling of alarm that he thus found himself cursing – as he did often enough of late. Lilian was flushed, nearly in tears.

'Hugh, I think you are horrid to-day. You are so hard and overbearing,' she cried.

Her thoughts too had evidently turned to self-commiseration. And that, he supposed, was what was meant by harmony. Justification of the idea it was a sacrament. He watched Lilian, united to him by sacrament.

Partly because she was not getting her own way, partly because she might at the same time (if she did get her own way), lose her rockery – but largely, after all, because her taut nerves had collapsed under the strain of their half-hostile, half-loving dispute, she turned finally towards tears. The change was not as deliberate as it seemed. It would not be entirely true (however true at bottom), that she turned on the tap voluntarily, as a last reserve of armament.

No, it was not deliberate, nor did Hugh, to his credit, (however much he hated those incalculable tears, as much as any other man), think the flushed cheeks, the quavering voice, the swimming eyes, were deliberate artifice. He knew that affection for him and inability to bear the least friction with him had a deal to do with it; and yet, for some agonizing moments, the blood surged in a great unexpected hot tidal wave before his eyes.

Before he knew where he was his exasperation was open hatred. Once again he was suddenly lost in an impenetrable cloud of murderous rage. He could not get clear of it. Not only to avenge his own bemeaned self, but hers too, for a

few brief blinding seconds he had the scarcely repressible desire to plunge the shining cake knife he had at the moment in his hand into that spray of lavender on the voile at her breast.

. . . . . .

As he struck there was a momentary resilient resistance, then in a flash the sensation of cutting, and then a minute squirt of blood out on to the blade of the knife.

She stared at him with goggling eyes, too amazed, too surprised, too horrified, it seemed, to cry out. She uttered a stifling gasp and crumpled limply back into her basket chair, and her body, shapely and soft in the trimly-sewn, fragile, flowered frock, collapsed on one arm of the garden chair.

The knife, dripping a few bright drops, was hanging limply in his hand. Blood now was steadily pouring out of the wound. Lilian, his wife, his little son's mother, was dying, dead, by his own hand. He was . . . but was he . . . free?

. . . . . .

Then his world turned back again to cooler green and brown shapes after the crimson curtain it had been. It was the world of sanity again. It was a little dull, the light, and he was shivering ever so slightly. He was making great efforts to master himself – not in order not to strike Lilian down, that was far enough from him now – but simply to face the state of mind in which such momentary madnesses, such deadly delusions, lately, alas, grown rather frequent, could occur.

Of course it was largely nervous fatigue, overwork. But still he found it difficult to grapple with; for in the moment the thing ended it was again so distant, so impossible, that he could not properly conjure it up again to examine it. Lilian, sweet as ever, dearer than ever, was speaking.

'My dear,' she said, 'but you mustn't worry about the whims and changes of a silly goose such as me!'

'I. . . .'

'Now don't say you weren't worrying – that would hardly be graceful, would it? Take some of that cake you've been so slow in cutting and let's make it up about the rockery.'

He took some cake.

. . . . . .

That night, in bed, he turned it all over and over again. He had taken lately to this chewing over, when in bed, all the tiny personal things of the day, where a year before he would have thought of his cases, or of the book he was reading at the time.

The word cheapened, cheapened, cheapened hammered in his brain. He still shrank from admitting its meaning to him, its application to his love. Yet though he was still happy, as most people would have called it, in his life with Lilian, he had to admit that there was something that seemed peculiarly to lower all that was innermost in his love, in the way that, day after day, to show that deep inner love was intact, he was obliged to devise small meaningless demonstrations of his affection, under which it crumbled and was worn away. Day after day he laid bare his petty feelings, the small moments of his love, all for the sake of that true inner love for Lilian in which he felt she should have been able to believe without those base little proofs.

Night after night his mind veered, unwilling to be restrained as his conscience wished to restrain it, to each of his friends in turn, and he compared his lot with what theirs seemed to be. Married, happily, unhappily, or unmarried, happily or unhappily, they passed through his mind. And his inquiry always ended with Jenkinson.

The question that entranced him was:

'Does Jenkinson too have to descend, in his many courtships of his many mistresses, to all the petty things to which I descend? And to which she too descends for me?'

He knew, from a hint someone had dropped, that Jenkinson, who had gone off earlier than usual on his European round, had once again changed partners. The last one had been good for six months.

Was it a more satisfactory way of solving the problem?

. . . . . .

'You married men don't know your luck,' Jenkinson had once said to him, pointedly.

'You envy us, then?' he asked.

'Putting it mildly,' Jenkinson had replied.

'Then why don't you. . . ?'

Jenkinson had not answered.

'Nobody in sight?'

'Not that.'

'Then. . . ?'

'Not a marrying man, that's all,' had been Jenkinson's reply, and he had changed the subject abruptly.

So then he himself was, he supposed, a 'marrying man.' He wondered what that really meant.

It was a warm and dry night, with full moon, and outside the night was restless; but slowly, assisted by habit, the problem, as usual, unsolved, he sank into a moderately peaceful sleep. In his half-slumber, as he sank to oblivion, all possible combinations of mating and of conduct other than marriage began to array themselves before him as if it were really possible for him to pick, to select.

But was it not possible then to be married, to love, to

unite, to be one flesh, and yet to maintain the integrity of one's spirit? He had no notion that here he was on the borders of a mysticism which it was beyond his powers to analyse or grasp.

V

DAYS moved imperceptibly, slowly, by; and their annual six weeks holiday in town drew near; for Hugh's business visit the previous year had been such a success, combined with their own holiday, that they had solemnly resolved to make it a regular institution. Apart from the annual holiday in summer with their boy, in which Hugh was never sure to be able to spend all the time with them, they were thenceforward every year to take as much of six weeks as they could in town. By making all his London business wait as far as possible and doing it all personally, Hugh was to be able to get away every year, and at the same time justify the trip to himself.

In town, for themselves, by themselves, as lovers.

. . . . . .

They were there, in town; lovers, was it not, on holiday. They entered the restaurant at something after eight. It was one of those foreign restaurants – Italian, Swiss, French – with small rooms that give a large proportion of secluded corner tables. It was not so much the low price attracted them, or the exotic cooking, as the feeling of intimacy they had there. To feel intimate, yet not quite be alone, as if a few witnesses of their tête-à-tête would make it more real; and their appraisal reflect on them an additional lovers' warmth.

Lilian was dressed in a frock she had bought that very day, a frock cut with reasonable style. She had been assured it was a unique model, all hot from Paris, and she had no reason – certainly not the necessary knowledge – to be sceptical. The day before she had had her hair marcelled. She had already got over the first malaise at the suddenly oversmart feel of her head after the waving. She had a horror, instilled in her

from girlhood, of being over-dressed; but against that worked a healthy desire to be as she should (as she would have put it), for Hugh.

They passed through into one of the inner rooms, and there took a table in the far corner. Through the door opposite they could see through into the next two rooms, but they neither of them thought they had partly been guided into taking that table by this prospect.

As they chose their dinner Hugh looked with real appreciation on the fresh, well-cared-for, serene features of Lilian, whose gentle and kind face stood out in marked contrast with the harsh, confused background of the restaurant walls and the majority of the diners. The walls were covered with bright-coloured extravagant designs, and at each of the tables the men's rigid black and white outline and over-toned faces and over-mastered hair, and their partners' too slickly redded lips, unwholesomely thin cheeks and strident voices made a brilliant, confused clamour.

He saw how wonderfully well, at the very first glance, Lilian stood out against the other women there. This examination, and the conclusion from it, amply satisfied him, because out of it he came as the lucky fellow.

He thought for a moment that he was what Jenkinson meant. He was, indeed, married, the happier man. How could he in such a moment be expected to recognize that the very train of thought in such a moment denied his very conclusion by showing the worm at his heart?

They dined. They chattered. Of what did they chat? After all, of personal things, personal things. That is what all but very exceptional people who know each other well come to before many minutes have passed. And so the evening of these married lovers went on. It was while they were at their sweet that Lilian said:

'I really must write to Mrs Coventry. . . .'

A bottle of wine stood beside them. They never had more than cider on their table at home. Ale was coarse, stout and porter for the cook, and spirits – well, spirits, at the most, for men alone, handy in case of illness. And so they most often had water only, though on these annual occasions they were resolved to live to the full. The wine was a bubbly one, but in spite of this it was only Hugh drank. Lilian grew increasingly ladylike and cautious by her upbringing's rules as the evening went on and grew round them more noisy, and alcohol did not in any case become a woman. She had begun to feel a shrinking from the excited trickles of tinny laughter that came more and more from some of the women in the place. How badly their drink became them! Women of light reputation? She did not go deeply into that; she believed in the charity that is the weedy flower of Christianity. All she wanted was not to be like them in any single thing. There was an abandon in their giggles, an over-excitement that she did not think was nice. So:

'I must really write to Mrs Coventry,' she said.

Hugh looked at her with eyes that did not seem quite to comprehend.

'Y-e-e-s,' he said.

He was vaguely conscious that Lilian had said something extremely tiresome, but his brain had not yet pieced together the fragments he had heard. His eyes, at that moment, had been fixed on a girl dining at another table. She was slight, dark (darker anyway than Lilian), but otherwise not like her at all. She was respectable, anyway, he thought. That is, she was not a whore, at least. She was Welsh, perhaps: a conclusion drawn from her soft, slurring speech. He went on to piece her together. She was about twenty-five, was not the sister of the man she was with, and yet at the

same time was not a mere acquaintance. It was obvious from the way they chose their menu that they were used to dining together like this. Besides, he had overheard something.

'This time last year,' she said, 'there was plenty, wasn't there, Hugh?' – of whatever it was the waiter had assured them was not in season.

For a moment, at the coincidence that the other man's name was the same as his own his heart thudded violently.

He went on. He decided she was not married, not only because there was no ring on her finger, or because their manner towards each other was somehow not that of married people, but also because he really wanted them not married. He wanted to be able to tell himself that this was how fine a thing a free union, with untrammelled love, could be. Delightedly, delightedly the couple laughed and argued, and he was sure . . . I really must write to Mrs Coventry . . . he was sure that at least they were not laughing and arguing about obligations to write to Mrs Coventrys.

So, 'Y-e-e-s,' he replied. He was back in a grey world. Things were again as they were.

'Do you think we really could ask her to drop in some time when she's passing and make sure Jenny's keeping the cyclamens well watered?' Lilian asked him.

'Concatenation . . . taking into account . . . periodic . . . .' Outstanding words of the conversation going on at the other table caressed his ears. A bit intellectual, what?

And then it occurred to him that it might well be just this braininess of the syren in front of him, and not any other quality at all that made her different from all the other women at the moment in the restaurant – and from Lilian. But the words he should be responding to floated back into focus . . . 'cyclamens . . . well watered.'

With a harsh bump he was back to earth, and immediately,

automatically, two queries leapt into life in order to counter that short inward disloyalty to Lilian. In the first place, was it not that Lilian was too honest and fine, too genuine, to be decked out in such trappings of pretended learning?

And there that girl was at it again, some nonsense about introversion of social behaviour, whatever in the name of fortune that might be! Free, Lilian, pure of such tinsel, that glittering that really, Hugh Garner, you must not forget is very rarely gold.

And then the second query. Should a woman be falsely intellectual if, as he had been brought up to believe, she cannot be intellectual at all? And it occurred to him that the question was very much like asking whether a woman should make up (except, of course, on the stage), to which the answer was – well, no Englishman has doubts as to that.

But that girl with the second Hugh had fine, clear-cut lips, the hussy. At that very moment she pulled a stick from her bag and began to repair the alluring springy curve, brought below her critical standards by the chewing of tough beef.

Meanwhile Hugh Garner was struggling, like a slow examination candidate within a few moments of the bell's ringing, to provide an answer to Lilian; and not appear to have been wandering. It exasperated him to be so nearly discovered in such a trifling thing, for Lilian's eyes were centred anxiously on him. He cursed the hussy opposite, he cursed all women, and with them Lilian. Cyclamen, water, and his permission of approval – and he found the clue.

'Yes, no reason why we shouldn't,' he said.

'How are you feeling, dear?' Lilian asked, with sudden solicitation.

Inwardly, he groaned.

'I? Feeling? First rate – why?'

'Nothing,' she said, 'I merely thought perhaps you had a headache.'

'Not a suspicion of one. Why ever should you imagine that?' He laughed a trifle uneasily. 'You were looking tired and distracted,' she said.

'But about those plants. . . .' he began.

'I'm talking about you now,' she said with coy firmness, 'not about plants.'

'Yes,' he said, a little brusquely, 'but we hadn't finished talking about the plants. Let's decide what to do with them first. . . .'

She smiled at him and shook her head gently.

'How is it you don't get tired of me?' she asked.

How she strives to maintain high tension, he thought. He said:

'Because you're you,' and looked fully into her eyes.

'Does that mean much?'

'A lot, indeed.'

'But you so often look nowadays as if something were worrying you. You never tell me.'

She accentuated the me in a cloying way.

'I'd give anything to know what you're thinking of, and share your worry with you.'

'You can generally be sure it's somebody's mortgage, and nothing more inspiring, nor distracting.'

'But still. . . .'

She shook her head slowly, a little sadly.

How amazingly persistent she was! He laughed, wryly.

'What a dear little cuckoo you are,' he said.

He hated himself for the glibness of these cheap words. How much of such debased coin passed in their realm – and yet how could he avoid it? Fiercely, too, he hated having a jolly dinner wind up in this maudlin way.

Meanwhile Lilian fondled him with that loving look in which self-sacrificing maternal feelings clearly smothered the more self-seeking, matter-of-fact passion of love. Should she not have realized a little of that too was expected of her?

But she was genuine to the marrow of her bones. There was no inner artifice, and if she smiled at him in such a way it was simply because her kind, mild grey-blue eyes smiled that way. And again she shook her head gently at him, as if to say, 'were you only as wise as I am!'

As they made their way back to their hotel that night Hugh Garner felt over-weary. Their hotel was not far away and the night, for London, was cloudless and fresh. They strolled idly back. Hugh felt as if his legs had been loaded with lead, and he was heavy at heart. Exasperation, chronic exasperation welled biliously within him, and only by a constant half-automatic effort did he keep his temper in control. The cruel thing was that there was nothing he could see to justify his irritation but Lilian's indisputable love, and he could not clearly understand what was happening between them.

VI

In September that very same year they went down into Devonshire for a long week-end, and it was there the act that had begun two springs before, when in a momentary blind rage Hugh Garner had wanted to crush in Lilian's head with the spade that was in his hand, came to a sudden silent grim conclusion. They spent the whole day, rod in hand, on the still green banks of a purring little river. They were enthusiastic both about angling and about eating the pinky trout flesh. The river was excellent; delivered its subjects benignly to the mere novice; the trees and brushwood by the rising, rolling banks had begun cheerfully to bronze. And yet. . . .

They loaded up with sandwiches and fruit and drinks in the morning, while the air was still sharp-edged, but sweet with the hillsides' mat of dew; and they spent from morning till evening at their restful sport, now together, talking softly, now separating, one up, one down stream, above and below the bridge. It was a delightful old high-backed bridge, over which the road was nearly deserted because the modern motor-road, which aimed at being as straight as possible, passed about a mile away upstream, sweeping across it in a clean line of asphalt, concrete and steel. In the early afternoon silence they could hear the sirens of the cars on the main road, and their glen, as they called it, answered with its rustling leaves and rustling waters.

It was there, with a devastating suddenness, that it happened. It would hardly be exact to say that he did it.

They had come down on Friday evening; and it happened on Monday evening. Three days of limpid bliss, and then a kind of fog. Not a sky of meridional agate, but still a sky that

was lucid in the hazy English way; and then suddenly fog, a fog no light made glad for long enough after.

That, too, might be English.

They had ended the day's fishing, and were sitting, in the soft lingering twilight of that pellucid day on the stone wall of the old bridge, and discussing their son's future; not only the immediate plans about school, but the general cast of ideas that they should induce in him; when suddenly Hugh saw under a fierce blaze of light how Lilian was stripping bare his innermost ideals with her fine, pale, soft, feminine fingers. He had the nauseous sensation that the fingers were tentacles, gentle and soothing in touch, but yet so many and so persistent that frail though their hold was he could not throw them off.

Every proposal he made was taken into possession by her, every thought of his was made her own. She was him, a reflection of him. She waited on his words; she left him no doubt but that his word was law, that by him alone she lived, that she was one flesh, that she was a mere subsidiary part of him, but yet . . . all was transformed in her, all shone with a tremulous useless moonlike reflected light. All of him that passed through her loving wife and motherly fingers was changed, and chivalry and love and the habits of his kind would make him then take back the mocking simulacrum of a son she offered him. And the close intimate bond between them was such that for every idea he pleaded for and every idea that she in her way accepted he had to lay bare a score of small thoughts and emotions, the machinery of his very own life, from which his innermost guiding ideals came.

For her to gloat over with her mild, affectionate eyes!

It was all a matter of such small things, yet it was so vital. Nor was it even in the end that he would not have seen how a woman's and a man's ideals are always apt to seem to be

different – opposed, hostile – regardless of how much or little they really are different, and that there can never be any question of outward concurrence. He would have had the sense to relinquish his son to her, knowing almost instinctively that it is not all these small things that of necessity mould young flesh; knowing that the very blood born in it, so to speak, does much of the work.

But it was not even all that. It was his own bondage in it, his own spiritual bondage. 'Spiritual bondage,' he repeated bitterly to himself, as he watched the gently swirling waters beneath him. The phrase had lately crept so insidiously into his daily life that he did not see how peculiar a phrase it was for an Englishman of his sort. He had never had much patience for philosophy. Only now and then, perhaps on Sunday, would he read one of the nation's many quarterlies packed with their mild, safe inquiries into the Position of Religious Feeling in Tasmania or the Connection between the Falling Off in Attendance in Church of England Sunday Schools and the Index of Prostitution in the Straits Settlements. He glared into the dark, greenish waters.

'But you, of course, know best,' Lilian said to him.

'Why *of course?*' he protested. 'There's no intrinsic reason, is there, why either of us should know best? Only I must say I cannot see the superiority of a prep school over a good tutor. Depends on the man, of course, but it isn't in a prep school that a boy rubs off corners, as you suggest.'

'But you surely don't think it good for him to be by himself just at the age when he should be mixing with other boys?' she asked, a little scornfully.

'But there are other children of his own kind for him to mix with. Better than the indiscriminate mixture he'd get nowadays in any school,' Hugh said.

'You mean the Coventrys and Walters?'

'Of course.'

'But don't you realize that they will be most of the time at school and that that's just the reason why we ought to send John there?'

It was a motherly sort of reproach, most gently delivered. And because it made him realize that he had, in very truth, not remembered that detail, it exasperated him the more.

'Well, if other people are so misguided as to send their boys to these schools it's no reason why we should,' he snapped.

Lilian did not reply. Then she said, quietly, but bitterly:

'Well, I should really have expected you to have different views about a boy's education. You appear to have the common feminine idea.'

Then, as if she already regretted her outspokenness (although she spoke most gently), she added the familiar old:

'But of course you know best.'

It was more this time than he could bear. Something gave way at last within him. All control vanished. He nearly shouted at her.

'Why do you say "of course, of course"? There's no "of course I know best." If. . . .'

She laid her hand on his arm. 'Ssshh! dear,' she said, 'you know it's true, really, Hugh dear, men *do* know best.'

He glared at her.

Her gently rounded features were smiling benevolently as ever on him, and that unruffled benevolence could only come from a sense of her own real mastery, because in all he was obliged to retreat, or else lay his inner heart bare to show her the deep, his intimate, reasons, that guided him. She saw his glare, and blanched a little.

'Hugh!' she said, protestingly.

Their life together had always passed (as cook and Jenny the maid agreed), in the sweetest believable harmony, and

the fact that it had been the same cook and the same maid for over three years was good proof of that. Servants are like rats, they make permanent nests only in sound ships.

So it was natural that Lilian could not believe her eyes as she looked on her husband's unfamiliar, rage-distorted face. His glare did not alter – except that his skin slowly took a darker hue – which might indeed merely have been from the shadows of night that had now begun resolutely to thicken.

'Hugh dear!' she protested again, with that long-familiar tone of safe unwavering loyalty and love. The honeyed yet horrified words broke the last dam before his pent-up passion. Led by a vicious, over-curling, seething wave the flood came down.

'You tie me up, you bind me in your. . . .' he began and broke off, gasping. Then 'Ugh!' he cried, and shivered all over. He could see he was incoherent and meaningless, but he could not stop himself.

'For every trifle,' he began again, hoarsely, with clenching and unclenching fists beating the air before him. 'Must we have these petty scenes, must we drag our love, every day, every hour, over all this petty mud of you know bests and dearie and darling and Hugh dear and Lilian dear and I think this and this is why I thought that if you don't mind you know best this that and the other. . . .'

He broke off, dazed, wondering himself what would come next. He had said all he had to say, yet though he knew how to unravel a tiresome point in law he had no idea of how to unravel his own thoughts, let alone express them. He was still palpitating with rage, but if Lilian could have been, for a second only, another being than the clinging womanly woman that she was it would all have passed over. That, however, was beyond her understanding.

'But, Hugh dear, why, remember. . . .' she stammered, faltered. The words were a goad to him.

'For God's sake don't ask me why,' he began again, now in a hoarse whisper. 'All I have to say is that I've had enough of it, enough of it!'

Behind them the little glen was nearly dark. The evening wind had risen and was moving through the trees, harshly rustling in those the leaves of which were already sere, ready to fall. Was it the darkness tempted him, or was it merely the blasting power of his animal rage? As that spring morning in the garden, and other moments since? However it was, the world swam heavy and obscure before him. The dark, green background swayed. Below him the now black waters swirled on with scarce-visible greyish, metallic gleam where boulders broke the surface in slight eddies. Swiftly and harshly he seized her with one hand by the neck, with the other below the knee, and heaved with insane force over the low parapet. As he did so he slipped himself to the ground, getting purchase with his feet for thrusting. For a second he saw, one hollow age of dismay and doubt, the whites of her wide-open eyes, and then she was gone for ever.

She was too startled in the first moment to cry out. As she slid over the parapet she instinctively clutched at his coat collar and at the parapet. He wrenched her fragile blue-white fingers free, and she fell, and as she fell she shrieked with a shriek that was choked in its very beginning by the cold waters that closed over her.

Hugh Garner had murdered his wife.

She hardly knew how to swim, and the fright, the shock, the terror did their part. Her clothes clung round her and bound her fast; and she was swept out of sight under the bridge to her death. He was alone on the bridge.

He was hanging over the low wall, staring into the darkness

and the scarce perceptible waters that had taken her. Beside him on the bridge were two creels and two rods and the haversack in which he had carried their lunch. He was sane again, tired, and cold and wearied of it;* in the darkness. The trees of the glen had swallowed, nor ever returned in treacherous echo her short, stifled shriek; and for all he knew no man as yet knew aught of what had been done. Slowly, it seemed, but really at desperate speed, in fractions of a second, his numbed and shaken thoughts revived and considered what was done. He was in black gloom, impenetrable after the limpid day.

*This moment, which particularly interests me, I have earlier treated, somewhat differently, in verse, which is reproduced at the end of this book.

VII

His immediate and only thought was to undo what he had done. He rushed to the other side of the bridge, wrenching off his coat as he ran. He tore and kicked off his shoes and flung himself on to the parapet and over. How rapidly the reaction in him had come can be judged by the circumstance that as he rolled over the parapet on the downstream side he caught a flash of white below him as the river bore the dead or still living body (if only the latter was the fervent prayer that filled his being) through the arch of the bridge and down-stream. A second choking cry, it seemed, floated up to him, but very weak and far off. He leapt. There could be no thought of diving properly, as the river was nowhere deep and was full of boulders above or below water. Yet in spite of his precaution he landed badly. His left knee crashed full on to a rock. He fell badly into the water, rolling, and was sucked under. When he tried to swim he found his knee was incapacitated. The leg hung limp in the water and only impeded him as he was borne, still trying vainly to swim, down stream. He saw he was gaining slowly enough on the current, slowly enough therefore on Lilian. Moments were precious. He hoped against hope. With all his strength he raised his head well above water and shouted for help.

About a hundred yards above the river, at a point some half mile down from the bridge stood a farm, and he prayed his voice might carry to it. In the now deep darkness, under a misted September night sky he could see nothing, hear nothing. The water was cold and his voice seemed to be swallowed in the dry air above him as in a bed of cotton wool. No answer came from the stupid night, and in a world of evil waters all that was tangible, the warm world of men, was far

and cruelly indifferent . . . when, 'Holla, holla!' seemed to come an answering cry.

He shouted and shouted again, and struggled to swim, but his damaged knee seemed magnetically drawn to bump on every boulder in the river.

There was now no doubt but that a voice was answering ahead, and there was a lantern by the water's edge. Exhaustion and fierce pain; and he rolled over and over, floating in a whirling blackness. He began to travel in a sort of whirlpool, every circle of which was nearer a confused, clamorous centre. The centre was a shepherd's lantern and a couple of hoarse voices. He tried to shout to them again that *she* was ahead, that *she* was to be saved, not he. He shouted, shouted, deafened by the reverberations of his own voice; but they took no notice, no notice, no notice, and sobs choked him, the tears running down his cheeks.

. . . . . .

When he came to (after about five minutes, he learned later), he found he was lying on his back by the river edge with a couple of men, one of whom he seemed to recognize as the farm shepherd, bending over him; their gnarled faces lit by the flickering of the shepherd's lantern. Down the hillside sounded other voices. The second man was shouting up the hill.

''E's coming tew!'

'*Her, her!*'

He tried to make them understand. Their stolidity was agonizing. Out of his lips came a futile whisper. He writhed at that puny sound, but he saw at least that though the dolts had been unable to understand his calls from the water they could see now that something more than his falling into the river was amiss. The shepherd himself appeared to be a slow old fellow, for Garner's words made no impres-

sion on him; but the other man was more wide-awake and bent quickly down to him.

'What'st y'want?' he asked.

'Save *her*. My wife. My wife, you fool,' Garner choked at him.

'What? I say, Jim, then sommin' else is amiss here.' He turned back to Garner. 'What? Where?'

Hugh Garner gathered all his powers. He was still in a fuzzy state, his head swimming and his leg giving him excruciating pain. He pointed back to the river.

'My wife . . . my wife . . . fell in!'

But the younger man was already afoot. The others, coming down the slope, had now reached him. He met them and quickly told them what had happened, and before another minute had gone they were all racing far away down the path by the side of the river. Hugh Garner was left, sitting up dripping wet in shirtsleeves, in the darkness, with the old shepherd. The searchers had taken the lantern, the only help they had in the darkness. The old man took him by the arm.

'Best be getting up t' th' house,' he said, 'get them wet close off. 'll be catching the death 'f a cold like that, a September night.'

Garner shook his head. He tried to pull himself to his feet, to stumble downstream after the searchers. He wanted to explain this to the old man.

'But, man, wi' a laame knee like that y' can't go a dozen yards. 'N yew can't catch 'em up. 'N when they've got y'r missus they'll be goin' straight upt' th' farm by th' west road, 'tis jus' over yonder. Come along slow like, a-leanin' on me.'

He helped Garner by the elbow, in a grip of iron, to get him up and then helped him to stumble along.

'Lookee, there's some more a'comin' down to help us old crocks,' the old shepherd added, trying to be blithe.

More figures were indeed already nearly up to them. They came, and they seized him, kindly, roughly, and lifted him up and bore him off to the farm.

They took him into the large, rather bare living-room of the farm, and the farmer's wife, a kindly but somewhat careworn woman of about fifty, immediately took him into her hands. Regardless of his protests at the trouble that was being taken (his demands to be taken down to the river were pooh-poohed from the start) his wet clothes were stripped off him, he was wrapped in blankets, warm toddy was poured into him, and his wounded knee was washed and treated. The skin was badly broken and there was one deep gash that must have bled profusely, for his trouser leg was badly stained. But the cold water of the river had stopped the bleeding, though that was evidently not the worst hurt. The knee was very swollen, so that the gash, far from tending to close, was squeezed wide open. With every minute the swelling seemed to be getting worse.

''Tis a bad place, the knee,' the good lady of the house kept on repeating, and nodded her head wisely at it, 'and Doctor Smart'll know a bit more about it than I do. There may be a stitch or two needed there, if indeed there's nothing worse wrong underneath that cut.'

She had bathed the wound in warm water, and washed the wound with iodine – imagine a farmer's wife with iodine! but she explained that her daughter had gone in for nursing and taught her the useful thing it was. She so chattered away about her children that it seemed obvious to Hugh Garner that the kind woman was trying, till news came of his wife, to distract his attention from his anxiety.

Then there was a noise of feet and voices outside. Garner's heart thudded. Had they found her?

Mrs Pratt, the farmer's wife, murmured a bluff excuse and bustled out with bowl of water, towels and lint, as if to get a fresh course of medicaments. Only the old shepherd, who seemed the trusty man of the farm, was watching him very intently. He still gave himself over to the pain of his knee and the pretence of waiting for Lilian's rescue, and had yet given himself even no count of the thoughts whirling, as if behind a curtain, in the inner recesses of his brain. He wondered vaguely if the old man knew. He realized that he had probably been watering his sheep at sunset, at the most not half-a-mile below the bridge where he had . . . but automatically he checked his thought, and the words became 'the bridge where Lilian fell over the parapet.'

The lie that was to form his life was already there.

Had no man then seen them? It was deep dusk. Did no one hear them? The old shepherd, down by the water, sound carried by water? By running water? The old man was watching him intently.

'A very gude woman Mrs Pratt is,' the old fellow said, and went on puffing at his short stump of a pipe. Then he offered a general observation. 'Life,' he said, ''s a lane with a lot o' twists in 't.'

Hugh Garner felt a creeping down his spine. Did this old man know? He watched the gnarled face closely. The old shepherd might be preparing him for the worst. There was hoarse whispering going on now in the farm kitchen, where the men had come in and where Mrs Pratt joined them.

He drew himself up and stared towards the kitchen, his heart wildly beating as he waited for the news he expected, the news that now he feared. He feared it for what it meant – for the irreparable damage it meant more than for his own

sake in any way. It still did not stand before him with the dazzling, blinding clarity it was to an hour or so later – that if Lilian was dead he was a murderer, liable – were he unable to lie consistently and act a false grief – to be discovered and hung by the neck till dead. The old shepherd watched him. It almost seemed that the old shepherd knew his thoughts.

'It might be,' he proffered, 'that I heard a one cryin' out about the time.'

Hugh Garner looked him straight in the eyes. They were like two animals, that measure their strength and their intentions and their purpose by the mere story of each other's eyes. There was a heavy silence.

The old man spoke again.

'And it might be I didn't,' he said.

He leant forward in his chair. He was sitting beside the couch on which Hugh Garner lay. He laid his hand firmly, with a friendly touch, on Garner's shoulder.

'No, I didn't,' he said.

. . . . . .

At that moment Mrs Pratt came in, and by her face alone Garner could see what had happened, and his head reeled as if he had swallowed a glass of neat gin. The hot toddy had helped to loose his thoughts of all control. He seemed to himself to be swaying before an awful abyss.

Mrs Pratt was firm, sensible and kind. She sat down beside him and did exactly what the old man had just done. She laid her hand on his shoulder.

'Mr Garner,' she said, ''tis best you should know at once all there is to know.'

He looked at her with wide-open, bewildered eyes, she said after, at the inquest.

'They've found poor Mrs Garner.'

There was no need for more, and for that matter Mrs

Pratt, with all her firmness, could not have brought herself to go on. There was no more to say, the tears that sprang into her eyes were better than any words. Garner closed his eyes and dropped back on the cushions without a word. There was a great noise thundering in his temples.

'Poor, dear man,' Mrs Pratt, a moment later, wiping her eyes, said to her husband, who then arrived back from market. 'What a blow. What a blow. So lovin', our Robert says they were, 'twas the talk down at the Hanbury Arms. As if they was on their honeymoon, Mrs Rich says, and then like this . . . and he to try to get her out but not be able to because he's broken his knee. Just closed his eyes and lay back he did without a word, poor fellow.'

. . . . . .

'Did you hear anything?' the old shepherd, James, asked his young assistant.

A message shot from one pair of eyes to another. The young one looked carefully round him. They were alone in the meadow.

'What, when she fell in t' water ?'

'That's what I'm a-thinkin'.'

There was a pause. The young shepherd shook his head.

'I can't say as I heard naught,' he said.

'More did I,' said the old man; and that closed the matter for them.

. . . . . .

And as far as his lying and acting went – the whole world concerned conspired with his evil self, as he then called it, that had started it. All the world testified to what an ideal couple they were, and there was not one whisper of doubt in their harmonious life.

At the inquest the men told their story.

The old shepherd began with his, and began it, not at the

cry he thought he might have heard from the bridge, but at Hugh Garner shouting from the river.

They had found his coat tossed in the middle of the road over the bridge, his boots by the parapet on the down side, the rods and creels against the other parapet.

He appeared in court on crutches, as his kneecap was still far from healed, and all eyes followed him with whispering sympathy, in which was not a little of that rather awed commiseration one feels for a hurt horse or dog; the commiseration inspired by a face that is a mask of imprisoned suffering that you can do nothing to relieve the dumb, inner hurt of. Garner's face, result of sleepless nights and a tortured mind, was drawn and haggard. It seemed to be drawn and haggard with that strong, silent, terrifying grief that invariably moves the hearts of others. In the little coroner's court everybody was falling over everybody else in his efforts to relieve the bereaved husband of painful questions of harrowing details.

'Death by misadventure,' was the finding.

The coroner, with a duly uncertain voice, expressed the jury's heartfelt sympathy for the bereaved man who had been so bitterly thwarted in his efforts to save his wife. And so Hugh Garner left the court an innocent man, an object of everybody's sympathy.

VIII

He had escaped justice for a thing he had done in a sudden tornado of passion so overpowering that it was like insanity. And yet it was not insanity. The rats in his deserted brain gnawed hopelessly – at suicide, at confession, at living the lie and finding a way and a reason to live, if indeed the good name of his son, the preservation of that young flesh with hope before it, from an intolerable burden, were not enough reason. Two things stood before him when in moments of weariness the rope had its attractions, and preserved him from the fatal step – that he knew he would never again fail to control his passion, and that he was acutely conscious that his shame and execution could never bring dead Lilian to life. To what end, then, his death on a gibbet when all it would bring, apart from the smug, self-patting on the back of Justice, was additional sorrow and pain and shame to those who were in every way innocent?

If only he could find what he did not know now – a way to live.

. . . . . .

He lay at the Green Farm while his knee went on mending for over a fortnight after the inquest. It turned out that his fall on the rock had made an awful mess of it. The Pratts put him in their best bedroom and fed him on eggs and fish and fowl and cream. He was an object of warm, most generous sympathy, and to them his morose gloom – for at times he only just avoided being harsh to his hosts – seemed the fine suffering of a real man's wounded heart.

Naturally enough, all sorts of relatives, both of his and of Lilian's, had wanted to look after him, but he would never even give a definite no to their invitations. He just avoided

them. This embarrassed them terribly at first, but they all went and talked it over with Mrs Pratt, and came each of them to agree with her that it was 'best for the poor dear fellow not to be moved if he didn't want to.'

There was another side to the matter. Some of his relatives, especially the womenfolk, thought it very strange that he should not want to get away as soon as possible and as far as possible from the scene of the accident and the irreparable loss, and above all, from the farm where he had seen her staring white body and identified it at the inquest. But, partly guided by Mrs Pratt, and partly, too, by the old shepherd James, who served as an elder adviser to the whole farm, they learned to look on Hugh's extraordinary obstinacy as his very firm way of facing his loss.

''E'll learn to do without her where he lost her. It's a hard way, but if he wants to, let him,' said Mrs Pratt.

And old James said the same, though he expressed it differently.

''E's got to face a new sort of life,' he said, 'so let 'm do 't 'n 's own way!'

And so, eventually, they all left him, and Lilian's younger sister, Jill, who was married to a naval officer of the name of French, and who had no children of her own yet, and so plenty of time to herself, took over the empty Garner household till her widowed brother-in-law made other arrangements. She was very fond indeed of her little nephew Jack. She arranged for him to go to school, and she comforted him.

They gave Hugh Garner the best bedroom, though in the end he managed to persuade Mrs Pratt to move him to a room on the other side. It was the sunshine, he pretended, that he wanted, and he lay on a couch all day by the long, low window, wide open on to the paddock and the peacefully murmuring vale. But they all knew he was watching the

final fall of the leaves, faster day by day, for as they fell the baring branches of the trees down the slope revealed, through their bony, writhing, interlacing fingers, a corner of the bridge. The bridge, they thought, where, poor dear, he had lost her.

The bridge where he had murdered her.

IX

At last the time came when the knee was no more than a little stiff, and there was no vital reason for Hugh Garner to stay on at the Pratts' farm. It was now November. He returned to Rickton a curiously changed man, so everybody agreed. As Jill French's husband was still away somewhere in the Pacific with his ship, she decided to stay on looking after her brother-in-law's house.

He decided to resume his business only after Christmas.

'As you think best, Hugh,' Jill French said.

'There's not much happening in Rickton in the winter. No building, business slack.'

'I suppose it is.'

'It's in the spring litigation begins, too.'

'Still, the work will do you good. You'll see more people. You're getting too much of a recluse.'

'I don't want to see people, Jill. I've got no desire to see people.'

Everybody he knew, every familiar face, was an object of temptation, a torture to him. In their eyes – take Coventry, for example, with his, 'Well, old man, glad to see you back,' – was pity, commiseration. They spoke to him like people treading gently on unsafe ground. They exasperated him, tortured him; because in him was a wild force wanting to cry out, 'I don't care! She is dead! Nothing will bring her back and undo what I did!'

. . . . . .

'And I'm glad to be back, Coventry,' he said.

But he said it in such a mechanical and hard voice that Coventry, he saw, involuntarily cast his eyes to the ground.

Coventry scratched at the gravel with his stick. He was evidently trying to find something to say.

At last:

'Bad business, that, loss of the *Oceania*,' he said.

The ship had gone down a month before; another iceberg wreck; with nearly all aboard; while Garner was still at the Pratts' farm.

That was the difficulty in conversation with them all. Everyone he met tried to find topics that would not rub on Garner's raw wound; because he had taken the tragic loss of his wife so badly. And all the only topics available, as always between those who are friends but not really intimate, were petty recordings of what had happened in the interval of absence, all of which, of course, but served to emphasize that absence and its painful cause.

He struggled to be natural, but every familiar face was a temptation to him. Day after day he longed to be able to cry 'She is dead. These griefs will not bring her back, so let us be really silent; let us not even know she existed.'

It takes time for us to realize our real motive when that real motive is a guilty one. Hugh Garner spent long hours huddled in an armchair, pretending to read, but in reality puzzling over his position as he had puzzled on the Pratts' farm. Was living now to be this incessant struggle? Was this dull agony conscience, and was the load never to be lightened? Had he fought it all out on the Pratts' farm, and found ease, only to begin again once he was back in Rickton? What was the bridge he had now to build between himself and others?

. . . . . .

It was not till his little son John's Christmas holidays were at an end that he got a faint glimpse of what the trouble was.

What has the young animal to do with death? Little

enough. When Hugh Garner, on Rickton station, saw a carriage door open and a compact little body of his son, with the rosy face under the tight little cap with its radiating red bars and bright badge over the peak, bounced out on to the platform, something alive moved in his dead person; moved, and the life in him suddenly obscured the dead.

'Hallo, Dad,' John shouted; and only for a second, as he remembered that his mother was dead and his father must be awfully cut up about it, although Auntie Jill was there in her place, did the smooth forehead pucker and the light slip away from the eyes.

The sight of the boy put more life into Hugh Garner than there had been all those months. The voices he had been sure he would hear taunting him as he welcomed his boy, that he had invented in sleepless nights, that were to cry, 'Yes, take the kiss of the boy, you who murdered his mother,' and, 'Bounder, dirty scoundrel, how dare you touch that innocent boy with murderer's hands,' were entirely forgotten.

In his heart was a light, joyous feeling that was so strange to him that it intoxicated him. As they went off the platform, father and little son, he laid his hand on the boy's shoulder, and then put his arm round him and lifted him off the ground against him.

John turned scarlet in the face; but not because of the way his father's grip congested his lungs.

'Don't, Daddy, let me down, quick,' he cried hoarsely, huskily, in his father's ear, 'the other fellows'll see me.'

Three other boys of the school, all a year John's senior, were coming off the platform. How they would rag him for being his father's baby!

'Fool I am,' flashed in Garner's whirling brain. 'Going to my head, this meeting the boy. But what a fine imp he is!'

'Hi, sir,' called the man at the gate, whom he had quite forgotten. 'Your ticket, sir, if you please!'

'What a fine imp he is,' rang in Garner's brain, as he handed over his ticket.

. . . . . .

Two weeks of bliss began in the Garner house, an oasis in a desert. Jill French kept herself effaced, and so happy was Garner with his son that he did not even notice the care with which she avoided their play. Only when he was without the boy – when the boy was with Jill, or with the Coventrys, his companions – did the same mute gloom come on Garner. Unconsciously, in the young living boy, he forgot the dark background of his thoughts – that in himself, in his own living was the boy's mother he had murdered.

On Christmas Eve there was snow, but on Christmas Day the promise of an old-fashioned winter – with snowballing and sliding and a snow-man – was washed away in torrents of cold rain. But what did they care? The boy's Christmas present from his father had been a lovely Basset-Lowke model of an English express engine, but Hugh Garner saw at once, as he tried the thing in the spacious attic of the house, with the boy, that what was essential was more rails.

The attics in the house had never been used, except in the old way as an apple loft. One huge room, in which you had to walk carefully at the sides, because of the steeply-sloping roof, gave into two others by a narrow door. The two others practically made one, with a great arch in place of door.

Father and son played in the big front attic.

'Let's run a single line, Dad,' the boy proposed, 'and if there's enough, go right through the door into the next room.'

'Right-oh, Johnnie boy,' Hugh agreed. 'You're the architect and general manager of the North Attic Line.'

'And you?'

'I'm the engineer and porter.'

But the new engine had L.M. & S.R. on its beautiful shining body; and some of the coaches had the same, but the boy's old ones had M.R.

Hugh laboriously copied the style of the jaunty Roman letters that railway companies use in white and gold letters on little shiny slips of black paper – on the inside of the paper of a roll film – and gravely they transformed L.M. & S.R. and M.R. to N.A.R.

But, alas, the rails only reached through the door. On Christmas day all they could do by evening was fill the little boiler once with water, already hot from the bathroom tap, so that it would not take so long to boil, and make a few trial trips.

Steam was up.

'Let her go, Dad,' cried John.

Hugh Garner's finger was on the starting cock; but he withdrew it.

'Not ready yet.'

'Why not?'

'The first time you have to have a flag,' said Hugh Garner solemnly.

'Quick, quick.'

And quickly they extemporized a flag and made the trip.

'There you are, still playing,' cried Jill French.

It was long past tea-time.

John bounded up to her.

'Look, look,' he cried – and he reversed the engine and opened the cock.

Cleanly and silently the little piece of mechanism unfolded its muscles and moved with a hollow rolling sound down the little strip of rails and round through the door to where Aunt Jill stood.

She bent quickly to stop it before it ran off the rails at the end.

'No, no,' shrieked little John. 'It'll stop itself.'

Garner was looking on, delighted. His cheeks were flushed, his eyes bright.

The engine passed over the braking arm two sections of rail from the end and with a wheeze of vainly compressing steam the engine and its trailing coaches came to a stop.

'Thank God, something has made him forget for a while,' Jill French thought.

. . . . . .

And so it was all the time that little John was at home and with his father. But at last the day for his return to school drew near.

'Well, in five days we shall have to send the boy back,' Jill French said to her brother-in-law one evening. John was in bed. Hugh Garner was reading.

A cloud crossed Garner's face.

'Yes, I suppose we shall,' he agreed reluctantly.

'Easter is early,' he thought, 'it will be a short term.'

He glanced at Jill. Five days still seemed a long time. But his eyes were drawn to the work she had in her hand. She was stitching at something.

'Even when they can afford to get things done for them,' he reflected, 'women are always fiddling with needle and thread.'

But Jill French caught his glance.

'I'm sewing tabs in his new shirts,' she said. 'There'll be more than enough to get ready by Tuesday.'

Why did it aggravate him so?

'Can't you get Jenny to do that for you?' he growled.

'Well, I suppose I could,' she replied. 'But I like doing it, you see.'

The remark cut deep into him. It was rarely anything that Jill French said made any impression on him. It was because she was naturally more distant to him than her sister had been, this being colourless, natural, in his eyes. But now her words burned into him. He said nothing.

'I feel then that, well, I don't quite know. But if I've done it myself I feel. . . .'

No doubt she wanted to say she would feel a sort of contact with her little nephew when he was gone, but her woman's commonsense prevented her from being so silly as to say it. She hesitated again; and while she hesitated Hugh Garner began to growl again.

'While I'd rather not be reminded of his going,' he said fiercely.

Something in that moment, something connected with the boy's going, had stabbed him with remembrance of the boy's dead mother, and of his being her murderer.

He wrenched himself out of the depths of the chair and walked from the room. The door slammed behind him.

He strode out into the hall, and stopped. Something in him battled to come to the surface, but he would not let it.

'Ill-mannered brute I am,' he muttered to himself, and spoke his thought out loud, as if to convince himself by the sound of his voice that it was his ill manners and only ill manners that troubled him.

In his hand he still held the book he was reading. His third finger marked the page.

'What confounded boorishness to go out like that and slam the door.'

He went back, ostensibly to put the book back on the shelf.

'Just remembered I promised I'd telephone to Coventry at seven,' he said, 'I must try to get him now.'

It was already half past. The sound of plates rattling, the dinner table being prepared, had reminded him.

As the door closed again on him, but this time gently, Jill French shook her head. Her eyes moistened. She laid down the shirt at the collar of which she was stitching on a name and number tab with *John Garner*, *No.* 43, and sat like that some minutes, staring into space.

. . . . . .

The dinner gong broke her meditation. With a sigh she bundled her sewing into a bag, dropped her cotton and needlecase into the basket at her side and went, almost as if reluctantly, to the evening meal. For the past two weeks that evening meal had been a reflection of the day's events with Hugh Garner's little son; such a different thing from the funereal, dour, embittered meals that had preceded.

She sighed again. She wondered whether, with this return of the old mood – because she spoke of the boy's going back to school – the smiling Hugh Garner of the last fortnight was to be changed back to the melancholy creature she had learned to pity from the bottom of her heart.

Later that evening Jill French sat writing to her husband. 'It is painful,' she wrote, 'to see how much poor Hugh clings to the boy. His grief seems to have eaten right into him, because to-day my mere mention of the boy's going back to school next Tuesday seemed in a second to make him as bitter and unhappy as ever before. He absolutely snarled at me something about he'd rather not be reminded of Johnnie's going before he has to, and then when he saw what he'd done, his trying to make it up with me was more painful still. I can't think when he is going to get over it.'

. . . . . .

But the next day, for all that, when night had come and the Garner household was buried deeply again in gloom,

all was well. It was one of those January days that are more like March. The Christmas snow and rains had dried quickly away, and the air was mild. Garner took John and the boy's two Coventry chums out in his car. Nothing, of course, was further from the three boys' thoughts than to talk of school with a grown-up who did not want to talk of it.

He overfed the boys on cakes. He let them blow the electric horn and press the self-starter. He answered all their questions, such as ' If you locked the steering wheels and kept them locked, how fast could the car go in a circle?' He told himself, too, a dozen times, that he was a fool to object to the boy's going to school, a fool to let himself miss him so – and he made up his mind to take more control of himself. He still did not really know why he wanted to keep that young growing thing there for ever beside him.

And that evening, so much had he steeled himself, it was he who broached the boy's going, at dinner.

'Jill,' he said, 'do tell me if there are any things I ought to be getting in order for John to take back.'

How quick the change in him was, she thought. How hard and firm with himself he must be, to have mastered his emotion at the boy's going so well. His lightness and ease where only a few days ago he had been morose and agonized so delighted her that she found endless excuses to talk of what the boy needed. She revelled in the re-establishment of a fresh and healthy atmosphere.

'Let's both go down shopping for him to-morrow,' Hugh said, 'and if we can't find what we want in Rickton, we can always go right on into Yarlingham.'

'Very well,' she said.

But he felt entirely at ease, entirely free from that something which cramped all his actions and all his thoughts.

'In fact, let's decide to go right through to Yarlingham as it is; we can shop better there, can't we.'

Jill French was delighted, though genuinely more for Garner's sake than for the proposed trip. What had produced the change in him?

. . . . . .

A peaceful evening – perhaps the most peaceful that house had known since its master's homecoming – ebbed away. The logs on the large, low, open fire crackled and sizzled brightly and cheerfully; and as the warm spell still held, the room was not, as usual in winter, too cold to be comfortable at any distance from the circle of glow round the fire.

Both Garner and his sister-in-law read. On her knee the cat, whenever a slight movement of hers, as she turned the pages of her book, reminded him he was alive, purred narcotically, and his contentment filled the room.

At last, stifling a yawn, Jill French put her book down and got up.

'Time I was asleep,' she said, blinking at him.

He looked up from his book.

'Tired, Jill?'

He smiled.

His smile was so unwontedly warm that she hesitated.

'Not exactly tired, Hugh, but still – feeling a little like bed. I was up early this morning.'

She stood in front of the fire, one elbow on the massive mantelshelf, baking herself, as she would say, a little before she went.

'It's awfully good of you, Jill,' Garner said. 'I can never thank you enough. I expect getting ready for John's going's making too much for you.'

'Not a bit of it.'

A pause.

'The house will be quiet without him.'

'It will,' she said.

'What can I say?' she thought hastily, 'to console him?'

'It's an early Easter, this year; have you noticed that, Hugh?' she asked.

'Yes,' he said.

He was not allowing himself to need consoling.

'Yes, the house will be quiet,' he said. 'Still, it's time I got to work again. I really have let things drift lately.'

She made no comment on that. What could she say? She knew too well that his two months idleness since he had come back to Rickton could have done no good to his practice. He was not the only lawyer in Rickton. But he had been a sick man; a man mentally lame; she had not found it possible to goad him back into active life, however much she wanted to.

'Yes, as soon as we've packed John off I must get back to my regular hours in office,' he said.

X

THE day came. Somehow everything seemed to conspire to be a little solemn. It was not the weather. By some freak of Nature this continued warmish and fine. The sun was pouring in the window. But, in the first place, something of the momentousness of the day from the first moment of waking was forced, not only on little John, but on the whole household.

It was one of the boy's whims, that winter, not to like bacon and almost to abhor eggs; although with most grown-up dignity he ate whatever was given him for his breakfast even if he hated it. The Garner household dishes, with the same cook, followed much the same round as they had done for the past two years. And Tuesday was scrambled egg day. But yet, as sleep slipped off him and his eyes became unwebbed, and, while still not entirely conscious, he realized that something momentous and unpleasant was planned for that day, something else, contrastingly pleasant and surprising, intruded sharply on his sense of smell. It was sausages frying, a little last treat his thoughtful auntie had prepared for him for his last morning.

But so often these small things that are linked up with accumulated emotion overbalance and fall the other way. The ecstatic aroma of pork and brownness and herbs marked the day as sacrificial and awful, and at breakfast the treat food had almost a bitter taste and stuck in his throat as he swallowed.

The unusual alertness, briskness and assertive cheerfulness of everybody was all of a piece with those unusual Tuesday morning sausages. It did not need the luggage already brought down into the hall to remind everybody that with

that luggage went the life of the house. But since the evening five days before when it had come home to him with a sudden shock Garner had been training himself almost to enjoy little John's going.

. . . . . .

'By the time you're back at Easter,' he said lightly, (remembering he was the engineer of the Attic Railway) 'I'll do my best to see about those points.'

'And the signals,' said John, brightening for a moment.

'And the signals, of course; and as for the bridge. . . .'

. . . . . .

But Jill French had to interrupt with an urgent question as to where Johnnie could have put his new football boots, and when that question was settled the light had gone from his face.

'It's a long time to Easter,' he said.

'Not a bit of it, Johnnie boy,' said Hugh Garner in most jovial tones, 'it's a very short term. And I've got to go back to work, too, you know.'

'You haven't got to go away for it.'

'No, but still; now about that bridge. . . .'

. . . . . .

'Perhaps I won't come to the station,' said Jill French.

'Not come, why ever not?' asked Garner.

'I don't know, except that I thought perhaps you'd like to see him off yourself,' she said.

'But you?'

She smiled.

'Nonsense, come with us.' And they all went to the station together.

The Coventrys were there, seeing off their two boys. It had been arranged for them to travel by the same train. The three boys would keep each other company.

'Oh, there you are,' cried Coventry, 'and Mrs French. Good-morning! Morning!'

Jill French and Mrs Coventry embraced, while Mrs Coventry's two sons tried to appear to John Garner as if they didn't see. It was only his aunt being silly; it was their mother.

Mrs Coventry was on the verge of tearfulness, as she always was on these heartrending occasions.

'What nonsense,' thought Hugh Garner. 'In any case, it's a short term, and I must get to work again.'

'What's your candid opinion, Coventry, about this proposal to build on the common?'

'There's no doubt,' Coventry replied, 'that it would be an enormous gain to the town not to have to pay ground-rents.'

'But is there any more reason why the town should have that gain than any private individual?'

The train came roaring in at the platform. Their porter found a carriage for them. They packed the boys in. They bid last good-byes. Now all three boys were scarlet with shame for the way poor Mrs Coventry clung to two of them, and the Coventry boys in particular ached with envy of John Garner, whose aunt was brief with him, and, most important of all, whose father principally shook hands with him like any man, and only at the last minute stabbed at him with a brusque masculine kiss.

Down the train the doors were slammed. The three boys formed a writhing pyramid of chubby cheek at the window of the compartment, glad, for all their sorrow at going, that the scene was over, and the harsh discipline of the porters had barred them in the train.

It began to move gently. It gathered speed. They waved their caps. Mrs Coventry was torn between her longing to see the last glimpse of her two boys and a terrified desire to

force them back into the carriage, in case the door opened and they fell out.

Garner and Coventry resumed their conversation.

'I've no doubt, though, but that Worthington will get his way. Nobody asked you your opinion on it?'

'I'm a bit out of things.'

Coventry nodded. He glanced aside at Garner.

'Poor fellow,' he thought again as he had thought so many times. 'It was an awful blow to him. Now, if it had been. . . .'

Lucy Coventry's voice came floating from behind them at that moment.

'There's talk of a public committee being formed for the protection of the common. You'll probably hear of it.'

'I'm starting work in earnest to-morrow. Old time at the office.'

'I've finished with the past,' he said to himself, 'now at last the new Hugh Garner begins.'

. . . . . .

He had feared the boy's homecoming would remind him of her; but in the boy he had forgotten her. He felt how easy it would be to explain it all now to Coventry. The danger had gone out of it, and telling would relieve that slight strain there still was in his mind when he talked to him.

'You see, Coventry,' he would say, 'I'd always felt this secret between us, but now it has practically ceased to trouble me, is quite a thing of the past, and so on.'

. . . . . .

'I'll drop in and see you,' said Coventry, as they entered their respective cars and drove off.

Garner turned to his sister-in-law.

'I think, Jill, I won't go into the office this morning. I'll start solidly in to-morrow at the old hours.'

'Perhaps you're wise, Hugh,' she agreed.

All the morning till lunch he turned over piles of old letters and memoranda in his desk. He was determined not to admit to himself that the women were right – that the house seemed empty.

What difference, indeed, was there in it at that moment and any of the days of John's holiday when John was over at the Coventrys' house? None.

But as the clock on the wall chimed twelve he realized with a start that he had been holding the same letter in his hand for over ten minutes. Just before he had taken it up he had glanced at the clock, and it was twelve minutes to twelve then. It was now two minutes past; one because old-fashioned clocks always strike at one minute after the hour and the other minute because of the time to strike and the time his slowly working brain was taking to work all that out.

Not a sound broke the stillness, but yet the house was not tranquil to Hugh Garner. His papers seemed to rustle too emptily in this room. It was like a room bared of furniture, clamorous: but yet there was nobody stirring in it.

There, somewhere, in her own room or in the music room, Jill French was sitting; gentle, capable, smiling, self-effacing – and silent as the dead.

'I must shake off this nonsense,' Hugh Garner muttered out loud.

Through the window the unusual January sunshine was lighting the bare branches of trees and bushes. He walked out into the garden. The gravel paths were cleanly swept. The roses were neatly capped with protective bags. Round the edges of the lawn the snowdrops had forced out their bright green spears. Jill French's hand cared for it all, as her sister had done before her.

But it was not that oppressed him. It was not the Lilian embodied in that garden – there she had sat when he had been

so near murdering her with the knife – it was not her that he contended with. He looked on those things that for some people would have been too painfully full of associations with perfect equanimity. Them he had lived down long enough ago – they were detached from Lilian – they were no longer her. By them, in fact, he lived, because they, when he was indifferent to all they suggested, made no sign that they were carefully sparing his feelings, or that they thought him callous.

It was a funereal lunch to which they sat down. Once again Garner's fundamental honesty was fighting in him, trying to force him to tell Jill French it was not the boy's going he minded. It was the ghostly situation that the withdrawal of that young life made for him. What he had never expected had happened: he had found delight in his son, and not bitter memories or haunting accusations. But something else he had never expected had happened too: when the boy went he found that, not merely was the boy no burden and constant reproach to him, but he was, of all marvellous things, a protection to him against himself.

. . . . . .

Some days afterwards it was that, talking of John, Jill French said, 'How fortunate it is for children that they are not so haunted by grief as we are.'

'It's a healthy way,' said Garner.

'Children, at bottom, are callous,' said Jill French, 'but, of course, in time they grow out of it.'

Her tone suggested that the loss of the child's callousness was one of the greatest of bounties.

'Yes. Perhaps better for them if they didn't,' Garner said.

Jill French found nothing to say.

'As they are they are happy. A blissful animal state.'

Again his sister-in-law made no reply. How could she rub

salt in poor Hugh's wound, that now he showed it was still quite unhealed?

'By all our associations, by all our griefs that linger and eat into us, we trammel ourselves.' Was that the word to use – griefs?

Her continued silence struck him like a rain of blows. He stole a look at her. He was sitting in the old, huddled-up, morose way. He looked out of the corner of his eye at her. But she showed no look of shock or disapproval on her smooth features, nothing but sorrow and commiseration. Her cheeks were placid with her sympathy. He knew that bovine look of his fellow men and women so well now.

'Are we not living things? Is it not our business, our duty even – say God gives us this body – to use it and live?'

'Of course, Hugh dear.'

'Then why do we poison ourselves with what's no more; why do we keep our living bodies harnessed with the dead, when only by full living do we justify living at all?'

He was nearly shouting.

Tears lay on Jill French's eyelashes. She trembled for the poor grief-harried man, but something struck fear in her too – his violence.

'Hugh!' she said, in gentle protest.

But he was gone from the room.

Jill French shook her head sadly. 'How hard, how cruel he has to be to bear up at all,' she thought. But he was already coming back again.

'I am sorry, Jill,' he said, 'do please forgive me; I really didn't know what I was saying.'

The mad look that had frightened her had gone from his eyes. Madness of a broken heart, it seemed. How should she guess how little she understood?

Tacitly they agreed to regard his mad words as unsaid.

Things slipped from bad to worse; if not that Hugh Garner became more morose, more fitful, more uncertain in temper, at least because his morosity and fitfulness and being fiercely on his guard continued without abating. There even came days when once again he relinquished going to his office in the morning. His old clients kept to him, and bore with his strangeness of manner, putting it down to his grief; but no new business came his way. Jill French guessed well enough how things stood; but all she could do was stick firmly and calmly to her self-imposed task, endeavouring in everything to smooth Hugh Garner's way for him, and free him of memories of her dead sister which might (his were the words) trammel him.

But the greater the conspiracy to avoid anything likely to stir painful memories the worse Hugh Garner's situation was. Between everybody that knew him and his wife of old there was this mist of something that he was conscious was there, but which they, tactfully and with furtive eyes, were intent on avoiding. Alone could he live by forgetting, abolishing Lilian; but forgetting her necessitated the possibility of light casual reference to her, one of the many who have lived and died; and he himself could not and dared not venture on such casual callous reference till it had come first from others' lips. Would not it mark him suspiciously down as not caring at all?

For his guilty conscience' sake he had to care – for appearance sake he had to care; but for the sake of his life, once he had taken it into his hands, he had to live as if she had never been, and that the careful delicacy, the considerateness of the whole world he knew would, it seemed, never let him do.

. . . . . .

'By the way, Hugh,' Jill French asked, one day, for example, 'I don't want to bother you if you're busy, but old Neave

tells me he's afraid some pipe or other leading to the rockery has been burst by the frost. He wants to know what he's to do about it.'

'Why can't Neave come and ask me? Why must he bother you?'

'Oh, doesn't he see why?' cried Jill French in herself.

'He thought you were busy, he said I'd find a better time to talk to you about it,' she said out loud.

'The old fool. I'll talk to him about it.'

He did.

'What's this about the rockery pipe, Neave?' he asked.

'Well, I thought, sir, as how. . . .'

'Bust, eh?'

''Fraid so, sir, I, not knowing like, in view of the circumstances. . . .'

'What circumstances, Neave?' – this sharply.

'It's how you feel about it, sir, of course,' said Neave.

'I don't understand. If the pipe's bust you'd better get it mended. Only not now, not till it looks as if we're at an end of the frosts.'

'Then you want to continue the mistress's rockery, if I may make so bold as to ask?'

By the mistress old Neave always meant dead Lilian Garner. Jill French he distinguished by calling her *Mrs French, ma'am* to her face, and *the Lady* to other people. The mistress meant Lilian.

'Of course, Neave.'

'As you will, sir, as you will' – in those tones of divinely inspired disapproval that old peasants produce.

So that's what he was getting at! That's why he went the roundabout way through Jill French! Afraid lest the delicate question of the dead wife's rockery touch the grieving widower on the quick.

'My God!' growled Hugh Garner, grinding his heels into the gravel, 'blast them!'

The world, with its kindness and its pity, was a warring conspiracy to defeat him, to torture him.

XI

THE days ground by, sullen, irascible and never-ending. In the mornings Hugh Garner was slow in getting up. He passed from sleep, not to waking, but to a state of daze. The gentle murmur of water in pipes, as his sister-in-law entered and left the bathroom, pricked him, goaded him into waking, but when he woke he was a shattered man. The inward conflict that had driven him, throughout the night, into a feverish tangle of dream, left him, morning after morning, feeling like a frame of broken, splintered bones in a covering of fatigued flesh and skin. There was no pleasure even in the morning bath, the morning shave, for each smooth cooling sweep of the razor brought him but nearer to the pointless day, when, time after time, from morning to night, between himself, Hugh Garner, living to deny that lie that two deaths are better than one, and the man or woman he spoke to would inevitably be thrust that grieving, grief-stricken Hugh Garner they all postulated and projected at him from their gentle commiserating faces. And almost more than himself (and Garner was painfully aware of this) suffered Jill French, whose affection for him was real. Distress at the sight of how, as she thought, sorrow for Lilian had crushed him often, in secret, brought tears to her eyes.

The only man of his old acquaintance with whom he had managed to get, once more, on the old easy terms of familiarity, was bachelor Jenkinson. Perhaps it was because at bottom Jenkinson thought the change would do Garner good, perhaps it was from his confirmed hostility to marriage; but it was certain that he was the only one who quite clearly was not always on his guard not to refer to Lilian's death.

All the others – even Coventry – still had the crushing reality of Garner's grief (terrible blow to poor Garner – they were still head over heels . . .) always before them when they spoke to him. But Jenkinson would clap Garner on the back and invite him to come for a drink with him before going home to lunch and say with what any who overheard it thought was a clear sign of the unprincipled callousness or even bad taste to which a libertine life had brought him:

'Come, Garner, don't be such an unsociable devil: keep me company – why, we're both bachelors now!'

Whereas, if, say, it was Whitehead (also a bachelor, but of the sober and virginal sort) through some rare impulse wanted Garner's company, and Garner demurred, and alleged waiting Mrs French at home, Whitehead would immediately have felt he'd dropped a brick, touched Garner on the raw by clumsily forcing him to dwell on the death of his wife.

. . . . . .

The time came for Jenkinson's annual tour.

'Look here, Garner,' Jenkinson proposed, 'in a bit over a month I'm off on my little annual trip. What do you say to coming with me?'

They had met, as they so often did, at the garage in the morning. They were walking officewards.

Garner's reply was to stare at Jenkinson. The proposal was obviously an absolute surprise. Garner's eyes lit up. What should he say?

But Jenkinson gave him no need to seek for words. 'Think it over,' he said.

'The great difficulty is my boy's holiday,' said Garner, stroking his chin.

'I understand,' Jenkinson said. 'So just think it over. I'd

enjoy your company very much. Brussels, Prague, Buda-Pest, Vienna, and then on the way back perhaps Warsaw, certainly one or two places in Germany, and round by Sweden, back by sea. Do you good, take you out of yourself.'

'He needs it badly enough, my God, he does,' Jenkinson was thinking.

'When exactly do you mean?' Garner asked, suddenly, as Jenkinson came to his office.

'My trip?'

'Yes.'

'Not till just after Easter.'

'Not till just after Easter,' flashed through Garner's brain. 'That might be easier to manage – it would only mean part of the boy's holidays.'

But he did not yet dare to think he would go with Jenkinson. He was lost, without any absolute point against which to take his bearings, in the fruitless adjustment between proper grief, proper mourning and sorrow for Lilian and the inward necessity he felt driving him to forget her and renounce even her memory. Would not all eyes be fixed on him, and might not keen eyes descry the truth, if he plunged straight from what they all thought was his prostration of grief into the unrestrained pleasures of Jenkinson's life?

It was, in the end, Jill French of all people, who pushed him free of his web of ghosts. Guided by blind instinct she helped him, when the desire swelling in him (certainly not planned purpose) made him, at lunch, say:

'I saw Jenkinson to-day. He's off again, immediately after Easter, round Europe. What a life those iron foundry people make for themselves.'

'If they've the opportunity and their work allows it, why indeed, shouldn't they?' she asked.

He frowned and shook his head.

'Wanted me to say I'd go with him,' he said, as if the idea, preposterous and even ridiculous, was most repugnant to him.

But Jill French did not see it like that. 'When is he going?' she asked – she was wondering if it would coincide with the boy's Easter vacation, hoping it would not.

'Just after Easter,' Garner said.

'Then why don't you go with him?' Jill French asked. 'You'll have about two weeks with Johnnie – the trip would do you good. Why not, if everything else fits in, go with him?'

'Go with him?' he then asked, as if unable to believe his ears.

Jill nodded at him in her mothering woman's way.

'Go with Jenkinson?' Hugh asked again. He seemed to be trying, so incredulous he was, or pretended to be, to give each of the three words in turn emphatic accent.

'Of course,' she said, 'a change is exactly what you need.'

'But so soon,' he protested. 'It is only eight months. . . .'

Jill laid down the book she was reading and looked straight at him, as if to pierce through the stubborn veil of his eyes.

'My dear Hugh,' she said, 'let's look things straight in the face. Things can't go on for ever like this. You know Arthur's coming on long leave in three months time at the latest, and you'll have to get another housekeeper then and altogether make other arrangements. But before that you need refreshing, refreshing!'

A protest was again, she could see, forcing its way to his heavy lifeless lips. She did not know that the superhuman grief he was acting was a petrified habit. She gave him no chance to speak.

'You simply can't go on like this for ever,' she said, very loudly.

She wanted to waken him. He had been asleep ever since he had at last left the Pratts' farm by the fateful bridge.

'Nobody, you know, would be more against the way you're living than Lilian,' she added.

She wanted to waken him.

After this bomb no word was spoken for fully five minutes. The atmosphere was heavy and tragic. It was Jill who broke it, desperately tired of the continuous weight of apathy that crippled her broken-hearted brother-in-law.

'Nobody would be more against this way of living than Lilian,' she repeated.

'I do not see,' he objected, 'how you, of all people, her sister, can. . . .'

The opening was familiar to her, so familiar as to be absolutely nauseating.

'You can't always live with the dead. You said it yourself once,' she cried.

He flushed purple when she reminded him of that awful outburst of his after John's Christmas holidays – when he had almost uncovered all that was eating at his heart.

If he cannot come to sense any other way, I'll shock him into it, was Jill French's thought. 'Or if you want to go on mouldering with the dead and in the dead you must give up the hope of the sympathy of the living. You should become something like a Catholic monk!'

'Indeed,' he began again, pleadingly, as if the reminder of what he had said to her, that she now said to him, was more than he could bear. But she would not let him go on.

'I've a right to speak plainly,' she went on, 'and I'm going to. Listen. Think of your work, if of nothing else. You've no capital to speak of behind you, yet you're steadily ruining your practice. . . .'

'But all my clients. . . .' he began.

'Yes, of course' – the tone was sneering – 'you may not then have realized, so unworldly you've become, that they're

simply sticking to you out of pity and sympathy. Do you think that's going to last for ever? Ugh, you try my patience!'

He gasped. How could he tell her that he cared for her patience little enough. She, for her part, saw she had done what she wanted.

'Don't you realize,' she said, 'that everything in this life changes . . . and that sympathy for other people, especially when they are not your own, dies very fast? You've gone on long enough reckoning on your clients' capital of sympathy. They'll all leave you soon. Why do you think Whitehead has put his affairs in the hands of the Hepburns, then?'

And she swept out of the room and left him alone. She had won. She had bullied him to take the step he inwardly longed to take, back towards life.

XII

On an excellent late May morning, Jenkinson and Hugh Garner sat in the café of their hotel, in the great open window giving on to the pavement of the street. It was long after ten, but both were only beginning to sip at their breakfast coffee. They sat idly talking, smiling, nodding, in the unison of people who have enjoyed in common some pleasure into which rivalry has brought no disharmonizing hate.

Hugh Garner had been first up. It was still all new to him; and his new mode of life, his new life, was new. He had roused Jenkinson. 'Let's take our coffee outside, on the pavement, in the sun,' he said.

'Oh, Lord,' growled Jenkinson as he rubbed his tousled head with his long bony hand and made for the bathroom, 'you young lads, full of energy, goading old bones like mine on their weary path.'

They sat in the café, idling over their morning coffee, for even Garner was drowsy and could not repress every now and then one of those delightful recuperating yawns of idleness. The day before had ended as so many days had done. An excellent dinner, an execrable variety show in a cabaret, and then, in the small hours of the morning, when the cabaret, after two o'clock, had released its nymphs, substance spent and pleasure gained and hot words, hot fingerings, hot, dry little laughs bandied with Irene Melnik when the last fragments of ribbon and machine-made lace had been wrenched off her wiry inexhaustible body. But although he yawned, and although, in the bright warm sunshine, he sat with sleepily half-closed eyes, his eyes beneath the languid lashes were bright, and his face was eager.

The waiter brought them English papers on cumbrous

bamboo frames. Jenkinson pounced on them, manipulating the great wings of *The Times*, that dwarfed its frame: but Garner waved them aside. Perhaps because in the foreign town, with not merely strangers, but foreign strangers, all round him, he felt untrammelled, he wanted to drink in, day after day, every small incident in the unfamiliar scene. His eyes flitted nimbly from one Viennese to the next; some with plump legs and soft noses and golden hair, others with ankles and calves that cried for a song of Solomon that should use, not gentle deer, but the slim and relentless lines of levers and the grace of tunefully turning wheels – legs sprung with millimetre accuracy, balancing pliant torsos that swayed over the wealthy curve of hip and bore swarthy little heads, long, narrow-flashing-eyed, and with broad explicit jaws.

The street murmured softly. Behind stretched the gloomy cavern of the café, with its massive tables, its tired gilt and its miniature massive little coffee cups, like clumsy fonts in village churches, but full of a stew of chicory on which floated an eggy concoction of whipped cream. From whipped cream his drowsy mind, because it hovered over Strauss, floated on to Russians, from Russians to Nadia and the other one, and last night, a trifle tawdry now, invaded the bright summer morning. Garner shook himself, and rubbed his drowsy eyes, brought himself back to daylight and Jenkinson before him, reading *The Times*.

Garner peered at him. An amazing, inexplicable fellow Jenkinson then seemed to him. Into his workings you evidently only saw out of England: he seemed even now to be reading, of all things, *The Times*' weekly pi article on the court and society page. These things were outside the circle of Garner's interests, but it did seem to him, as he sat in the Viennese café gently titillated by memories of Miss Irene Melnik's charms, a little curious, this way of mixing our

spiritual welfare, once a week on the eve of worship day, with functions and ambassadresses' indispositions and such charming information as 'particularly for dwellers in the country the little velvet coatee lined with a contrasting colour or better still with fur is welcome!' He recalled now Jenkinson in Brussels. Jenkinson, he remembered, explained to a logical Walloon with whom they lunched that the superiority of the English press lay in *The Times* by reason of its *feuilleton hebdomadaire qui touche toujours les problémes les plus actuels de la vie confessionelle.*

But thoughts of Jenkinson, fidgeting with his enlightened *vie spirituelle* jostling the little coatees brought Garner back to women, because that, after all, was what Jenkinson meant to him. Jenkinson had discussed the antiquity of the Eastern ritual with his Russian, Nadia, while on his way to bed with her the night before; and his voice came back to Garner as it rang down the hotel corridor, 'And so the implements of the sacrament of the body and blood persisted longest in use in Western Europe in Godforsaken Ireland.' His thoughts were confused, but were impatient like tethered horses. As he sat there sipping coffee, in a misty English meditation, wrapped in the cottonwool buzz of the street – their movement marked only by the clatter of the stoneware cups of chicory coffee, there was a jerk of the tether ropes, and they were back at women.

For three weeks he had lived in a new world. For Jenkinson's women, however much, if they were Russians, he talked to them about God, lived in an unfamiliar concentration on their bodies. Again he remembered Jenkinson last night disappearing from the corridor with Nadia.

'I use Godforsaken,' he added, 'in our Judaic English sense.'

'Is his the real English way?' Garner asked himself. 'At

least nothing seems to weaken his enjoyment of religion, if on a morning like this he can. . . .'

He certainly could.

Jenkinson cut into Garner's meditation.

'Really, really,' he murmured, as if to himself. 'Just listen to this, Garner, I absolutely disagree with the man, the approach is so false,' and he began to read from *The Times*' pi column, with a true English fervour:

'We . . . to the will of Him who is the Father and Lord of it all, see in it. . . .'

But Garner did not listen, could not bring himself to follow out this academic toying with spiritual values. If that was the English Judaic sense – by which he supposed Jenkinson had meant moral Roundhead Old Testament, Godfearing England – then he himself must be super-Judaic. For there was a plethora of women, and Garner somehow, after some days of surfeit, was shrinking from them. Their voices, shrill and hot. Their eyes, rapid, birdlike and dry. Their facility. Their ease in accomplishing the union of love, and their still greater ease in untying the knot and getting ready to tie it with someone else.

What was there in him rebelled against that?

He now interrupted Jenkinson.

'Don't you find your Nadia's a little too . . . ?'

He pursed up his mouth and gave a mock shudder of shrinking.

Surprised and a little piqued at thus being checked in his scratchings at theology:

'What's that?' cried Jenkinson. He was genuinely puzzled.

Garner repeated his question. Jenkinson smiled, indulgently.

'Like everything else,' he said, 'depends on how you take it and whom.'

And, thus neatly and kindly disposing of his weaker companion, he resumed his theological stride.

'Now if you take the Will to be circumscribed by. . . .'

But Garner once more was not listening. He was turning things over and over in his mind. It was absolutely essential to him to find where he stood. He had been living in a whirlwind, and England, and all England harried him with, was far distant behind him. Perhaps for that very reason the sight of the newspapers even was irksome.

XIII

Hugh Garner was lying in bed, late in the morning, in his Vienna hotel. The old problem was still there, the need for a sane balance between remembering and forgetting the woman, once his wife, that he had murdered; only now it had changed its aspect, and seemed a different problem to him. He had, on the Pratts' farm, and back in Rickton, sought a secret callousness, to be his salvation, his means to peace; and now, in the hurried confusion of his days with Jenkinson, with England a very hazy thing far away behind him, no more than vaguely over there as the sky redded with sunset and the arc lamps marked another dawn of revelry, he had found a callousness; and now he had found it it agonized him.

It came ready poured into a mould, a stiff cast little phrase. When, in Brussels, his second night out, he found himself alone with one Hélène, a carroty-haired girl, and pulled off the shoulder-strap of her mauve chemise so that her pert, undeveloped, little right breast peeped out over the cheap lace, his sober English upbringing suddenly awoke and cried at him in horror at his infidelity, and through the fog of the wine he had drunk he was aghast at himself.

'What is with you?' Hélène cried.

He was stone still, staring at what he saw in front of him. The girl was alarmed.

'Crazy,' she must have thought to herself a moment later, when Garner, pulling himself together, answered the sober English upbringing within him accusing him, by the final answer of, 'But I'm a free man now I've finished off Lilian,' and burst, after his strange silence, into a raucous peal of laughter. But that slick phrase, repeated and repeated once

he had found it, which released him that tipsy night to enjoy all his lust without any carping restraint, after that night bit deeper and deeper into him. Was he then a moral degenerate, or a kind of thug, that he could thus coarsely sum up that act of his unbalanced temper as 'finishing off Lilian?'

He turned over on to his other side in the bed, seeking a coolness of sheets which would a little refresh him. He was determined, that morning, to make a desperate attempt to get to the bottom of his nightmare. Jenkinson had gone off the day before into the provinces, to visit a factory there. Garner was alone, had rested that first evening he had been alone, had slept alone. It was no doubt the solitude that aided him in his efforts. He had to get down to that night in Brussels when all this new way of living began, and when the callous phrase he had laboured for came at last – and brought no peace to him.

. . . . . .

'Come,' the girl Hélène had said at last.

She pronounced it 'kom' – that he could remember clearly.

They had a little dining-room to themselves, the four of them. Jenkinson and his choice were still sitting up to the table. The girl Hélène and he were on the little settee provided. And then he got up and went with her, although he knew now it was not so simple as it seemed. There had been resistance in him – what was it? He knew he had had to fight with himself to make himself do what he knew he wanted to do, but the reasons and arguments were gone.

The corridor, leaving the lift shaft, plunged into the heart of the hotel for a dozen yards, and then turned half to the left, and then split left and right. He followed the numbers on the doors – that he remembered clearly enough, because he wasn't quite sure whether his room was one of the four on the right or the four on the left – but what he remembered

much clearer still was that when he, with Hélène at his side, turned down into the right-hand little blind alley in which his door lay he passed a trembling hand over her firm, round, little rumps and, sliding it round her hips he met the defence of her cool, thin fingers, which gently but firmly held his hand back.

'Shh!' she said, and wagged a little finger coyly at him while she pressed against him in the most agonizingly exciting way.

That he remembered clearly enough, but what went before it in his mind was a blank. Then came that shoulder-strap and his last little stab of habit called conscience, but after that again, in his effort at reconstruction, all he could get at were definite physical impressions in which he lost the image of carroty-headed Hélène in his own engulfment in pleasure.

Again he turned in his bed, to get a cooler patch of the sheets.

So that was all that remained. That was in Brussels – he counted the days – Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, being a fortnight to-day, that is, seventeen days ago. He had murdered one woman, and at last gone to bed with another, but seventeen days later he could not recall exactly whether or not the wife he had murdered had been present in his mind as he lay with the cocotte. Before, yes: but that was washed from his memory; and for all his efforts he could not bring it back at all.

He was in Vienna. Seventeen days ago only, still seventeen days ago, out of reach and intangible, Hélène with the red hair lay interlocked with him in Brussels. And when he tried to get down to bedrock and find what was in him – what he was, in fact – as he came to doing that, something that seemed like common-sense whispered in him:

'But you are in Vienna now – this Hélène was in Brussels, seventeen days ago.'

And he stared at the colour-washed wall before him, stencilled in an enormous pattern of blue and purple and gold. He stared, stupidly aware, at the back of his mind, of how only the earthy, physical things and the things that really touched his own satisfying of those earthy physical cravings remained clear in his memory, had not already terribly faded – of that night which might have been expected to be very important, that night of the breaking of his long sexual fast in Brussels, seventeen days (and a few hours) ago. The more, too, he tried to fix on that thing so near, but so far, gone for ever behind him – tried even to get a clearer picture of the flaming-haired girl's attitude to him, the degree of sincerity that had shown in her eyes, the conviction of her voice – the more it all faded, receded, and the effort of the search seemed to hypnotize him and bring him to a state of stupor.

The gawdy wall, near and tangible, as it seemed, occupied him. The whole of the purply space between flower and flower shaped itself as he stared. It shaped itself – was it not by memory of the willow pattern plate? like a bridge, and then the purply glow of sunset and the gilded water flowing underneath drew his fascinated attention. A body then, wrapped in some gaudy stuff, floated immeasurably slowly from the parapet of the bridge towards the water. And it became like the slow silent fall of a glittering cascade that we know is swift, but yet, seen from the other side of the valley, inaccessible, and thousands of feet away, seems to be an immobile thing on the far mountain side.

Far away, too, on all sides of the vast field of the walls of the room glittering eyes watched in the tracery of flowers, watched the scene. Slowly Lilian's body fell to its death

before him, and before those many eyes, and yet it was ever there, ever falling. The minutes swelled to years, and to her death she fell – fell last year, fell now, in years to come fell. It was crystal-clear there before him; and, as though he did not know he was months away from that parapet of death before him, to prove to himself that he was not there now he was obliged to get out of the bed, and go up to the wall, and finger the rough, chill surface of the plaster and disperse the scene.

He stood there, against the wall, a long time, a rather gaunt figure in his pyjamas, fingering the wall for all the world like a man fingering a map. And then, with a sudden decided gesture, he wiped the last trace of his imagination from the wall, dressed quickly, stumbling into his clothes, and rushed from that shadowy bedroom into the morning sunshine.

A kind of fatalism had seized him. As he walked in the central European May sun he knew as his feet touched the pavement that someway and somewhere beyond him was that which he had hitherto brooded over, seeing it a thing forever gone, a thing for ever irreparable. It was not irreparable in that sense any longer because it was equally irreparable, equally written in the books of life before it happened – *before* it took place with him there. Now, just as before he had done it, it was there, somewhere, sometime beyond him; just as before he had lain with her, just as now after he had lain with her, both he and that Belgian girl Hélène were there; but a there somewhere unreal and abstract, not where he was now, not there, neither that girl Hélène nor the other, Lilian falling to the water. Apart from what of them was in him now, which was a memory of a real thing which was no longer real, they, those two women, of many women, were not there, never there, where he was now.

Over there, too, in that *beyond-space* which was everything which was not himself-thinking-there-as-he-walked-the-Vienna-pavement, lay even his own worm-eaten corpse, and, in its wooden box beneath the soil and grass and English flowers and showers, its discoloured lineaments went through their last shudder as the segmentary white maggots revelled in the life come to them. Over there was he, Hugh Garner dead, but yet he, Hugh Garner, strode in reality, real and alive.

He was gripped fast between equal forces, he the present, between past and future. There was equilibrium in him, because present he, living, breathing, hungry, thirsty, lascivious sleepy he, Hugh Garner, solicitor, he present was for himself, which was all he could know, the centre of the surging mass of the rest.

It was the opposite of a whirlpool. He was not drawn down into it, but rose from the seas, rose from his timeless, spaceless chaos, poised on a pinnacle of the whirling waters, and as the spray cleared over the waters he towered aloft in the limpid morning light. He was in a state of supreme exaltation, when nothing temporal round him was of any importance. Life in him had defeated the death. His sense of ever-present life that shows as unreal all that not only is not, but never was that life, was no longer now a mere conviction. It was the very blood beating in him.

. . . . . .

It was nearly mid-day, and the whole world was settling down at cafés for beer before lunch. He followed its example. The café he chose was already nearly full, and he was obliged to sit inside, though he managed to find a table near the window. It was a very pleasant state of mind he was in. There seemed to be no ties. Even Jenkinson might not be back for a day or two.

'Old Steinbrück'll almost certainly want to bore me with stories of his latest shoots and show me the latest additions to his coat racks,' he had said, 'so don't expect me before Saturday.'

From his vantage point by the edge of the window Hugh Garner viewed the seated crowd and the other crowd pouring by in two mingling streams in the street outside. He remembered the first and only other time he had been abroad in his life – when, coming down from the 'varsity, he went to Paris. Then, steer on the threshold of bulldom, he had drunk in the new impressions of the Paris boulevard. Especially the heifers. Once again, as if still unaware of the trials of passion, Hugh Garner raised his head lazily and with delight snuffled the confused complex air. With uneasy legs the young Viennese girls seemed to frisk as they passed.

After the fierce mental activity had come a blissful vegetable state of calm. Real well-being. He sipped his ice-cold beer slowly and savorously. For long stretches of time he was absolutely indifferent to anything beyond the ring of froth that after each sup slowly levelled out again on the flaxen surface of the Pilsen. In his ears the stir of the café was like the rustle of the wavelets of a calm sea on a sandy shore. In the same way it left a water-line of entrancing foam to slip languorously back towards the body of the waters.

He woke from this daydreaming at last with the sensation that something pleasant was at hand, with his blood beginning to move easily again under the stimulus of a novelty. He raised his eyes, and immediately found himself staring deep into a pair of deep blue-grey eyes before him, framed in coal-black lashes. He stared and she replied. They drank in each other's eyes.

'Most romantic, novelettish,' he said to himself.

But in his new frame of mind he felt no lofty superiority to cheap romance.

She. Not more than two-and-twenty. Slight-built, as far as he could tell from her seated form. Yet decently proportioned, well developed. Her face a squarish oval, but with a trace of aquilinity in it that sharpened and enlivened the square-cutness. It was, as the novelettist or the historian's description might say, both animated and reposeful, keen and gently soft, advancing and retiring. In short, it was to Hugh Garner as the faces of heroines are to their admirers in stories of the days of Waterloo. It was, for that matter, as heroines always have been and no doubt always will be.

His eye quickly essayed to appraise her, but all it succeeded in doing was eliminating the unlikely. In the first place, not only for her colouring, but for her lack of what Hugh Garner would have described as motherliness, which usually shows so vividly in a woman's face if she possesses it, he was sure she was not German. It did not strike him that her hat helped him there, but it is possible even for the whole of one's life to be guided in one's judgment by quite proper indices without ever analysing one's arguments and defining those indices.

He passed to the Latin possibility. There is, virtually, a substratum of sense in our characterization of races. And though Latin may be properly merely a geographical term, and have nothing much to do with races, we all know what we mean by Latin. And he rejected Latin. She was not Latin because of the lack of conventional restraint, the presence of a certain abandon in her. His eyes had been opened for him in this matter by intensive study under Jenkinson's instruction – study largely of Russians and Germans, with Jenkinson saying to him every day:

'And mark my words, Garner, the more nordic they are the more abandoned they are, and the less sophisticated and the more limpet-like they are and so take care!'

Latin, of course, was sophisticated. Which was where the face in front of him caught his eye, because it was not a bit nordic; there was a trace of the horse in her face as there is with Russians; yet behind the mask of innocence she wore there was that abandonment. He was only puzzled by the signs of sophistication too.

. . . . . .

It was only after all this study that he realized she had noticed his vulgar stare – that he realized, indeed, that he was staring at all. She had noticed it and was faintly smiling at him. This discomfited him. He was sure she was not any sort of whore, and yet at the same time he had never had intrigues with respectable women. He cursed himself, therefore, for his boorishness and was about to turn abruptly away when he noticed that her smile was getting broader and broader.

A perfectly free, humorous, and not at all a suggestive pick-up smile was directed point blank at him. Then he seemed to remember he had seen the face before, and his trials really began. He was utterly at a loss. He felt an awful fool, because it began to be not at all unlikely that he knew her quite well, and it was merely a slip of memory in him – and of manners. He racked his sleepy brain to remember where he could have seen her or been introduced to her, but without success. Something suggested England to him, and, indeed, a certain lack of exaggeration in her clothes would have borne out his glimmer of sense, but while he puzzled it out he went on staring boorishly at her, unable either to take his eyes off her or to make the best of a foolish situation and return a salute which he might in his muddle-

headedness simply not have noticed. Perhaps she had already nodded good-morning to him. Perhaps that was the reason for her broad condescending smile.

He got up at last and slowly went up to her, to apologize, he thought. When he reached her he was still so wrapped in his thoughts that he had met her in England that he spoke in English to her – it did not occur to him that it would have been more reasonable in Vienna to use German, however few words he could muster, to a stranger.

'Please allow me to apologize. . . .' he said, 'for. . . .'

'Staring, eh?' she said, with a laugh. 'Sit down, please, do sit down. I can't bear tall people standing over me.'

And Hugh Garner did sit down. He wanted to finish his apology. She would not let him.

'I'm afraid it's my fault, you see,' she said.

It was then that he noticed they were talking English, and that her speech was perfectly English.

'You see, I noticed you staring at me a long time ago. But I could see you didn't mean it, as you were daydreaming. It was so funny to see what a jump you gave when you realized what you were doing!'

'Uncommonly rude of me, I'm sure,' he began.

'Yes, but I could see you thought you knew me and stared quite absent-mindedly because you were really thinking about something else and only half thought about me. That's right, isn't it?'

He then said something that surprised him even more than it did her He said:

'That's not the reason why I stared at you. I didn't stare at a possible past acquaintance or at a possible future acquaintance, I stared simply at you.'

He delivered this in a soft, deliberate English way.

'You are very practised in paying compliments, I see,' the unknown said.

She might have been a trifle annoyed.

He looked her right into her eyes.

'No,' he replied, 'I am trying to practise telling the truth!'

He was buoyant as a cork on the flood of his inward exaltation, and the flood tide swept him on towards something he had never contemplated.

. . . . . .

And in the end they lunched together, and they dined together, too, that day. They lunched together, they dined together the next day as well. Then a wire arrived fom Jenkinson – he was getting back the following morning in time for lunch, and proposed he and Garner should go on to Warsaw by the evening train. And things had moved so rapidly between the two – between Janet Godson (she was only half English in spite of her name) and Garner – Jenkinson's return came like one of those too familiar spells of winter that follow immediately on the first ephemeral taunting delight of an English summer.

It resulted in a note left for Jenkinson at the hotel.

'Lunching at Feuerbach's. Not alone but very much want you to come. May change my plans for rest of our trip, but we'll all three talk it over when you come. One o'clock at Feuerbach's.'

XIV

THAT luncheon party at Feuerbach's was most triangular. Jenkinson came; and Janet Godson, of course, knew well enough that he was out to rescue Garner from the clutches of the vamp or minx he imagined her to be. There was, according to the instruction in love Jenkinson had tried to get Hugh Garner to understand, a clear line of conduct to be followed.

Love, according to Jenkinson, until it grew dangerous, was based on a foundation of mutual physical adjustment, a modicum of mutual physical admiration, and the transference (even among the matriarchist Melanesians) of solid cash from man to mistress. Out of that unsentimental stuff grew friendship and camaraderie, which were based on a balance of power. But once the credit system between man and mistress was upset by faith, which is sacrifice appearing on either side, this was evidence that the bonds of affection had appeared; and the only course left was flight. When he found Garner's note waiting for him he swore, blasting Hugh Garner for a double-dyed ass. He was seriously alarmed – into whose clutches had the man fallen? The party, therefore, began with him outwardly cool and distant – inwardly furiously hostile to Janet Godson.

But Janet Godson – and that was the principal thing – thought she understood well enough. She was young, sophisticated, but yet quite inexperienced; and so it was easy for her to think her views were – well, much the same as Jenkinson's. Her mother, Adèle Horgos (for she was half Hungarian) had bequeathed to her vitality enough and instilled in her love of personal liberty enough for Janet, with all her Godson English uprightness, stubbornness and

backbone, to be convinced that love could know no bonds and that the true person should not try to accommodate itself to them.

In other words, marriage, having nothing essentially to do with love, should be shunned by anyone who, like Janet Godson, in her untried idealism, cared for love and really believed in it.

As it happened, Hugh Garner was the only one at that luncheon who did not quite know what was afoot, and he bitterly resented having to care. The prospects beyond those immediate moments in Vienna were so bleak that he automatically shunned thinking of them. He basked in the sunshine of Janet Godson's love; and she had in those three short days been so content to bask in the sunshine of his schoolboy adoration of her, and, it must be admitted, so full herself of her own pleasant sensations, that the real problem had not arisen between them.

. . . . . .

Feuerbach's can do you pretty well – get right away from that nauseous Austrian cooking. Jenkinson was really hungry, and Janet Godson, not merely revelling in her healthy young appetite, but thoroughly out to enjoy herself. As she had in her heart at this early stage of her love, no suspicion of a womanly desire for absolute possession, and it was Hugh Garner who was sleepless with desire for her – as this fever had not yet, by the consummation of desire, passed from him to her – she was ready to look on Jenkinson's rôle with amusement, and feel interested in how Hugh Garner would fight for her.

The conversation was sprightly. Perhaps it was a little too sprightly, a little too elastic and rapid, but if this was so it was because Hugh Garner sat so silently, was so glum. The Strauss which was on at the opera was played ball with by

Jenkinson and Janet Godson, tossed to and fro by them one to the other in front of Hugh Garner; and from Strauss the conversation forked, and toyed by turns with hybrid opera and with music proper.

And so while Garner toyed with his food and tried to keep the gloomy prospect before him out of his mind Janet and Jenkinson took each other's measure. Is it necessary to go into how this is done? We surely all know well enough how in these moments when much depends on our knowing at once somebody we have not seen before the reality of that person automatically emerges in all essential things from their reflections when we project the latest society scandal, the latest opera, the latest spectacular murder and such problems as the nature of divinity or the purpose of music on to them. It is surely sufficient to state that by the time coffee came, Jenkinson was reassured as to Janet, Janet reassured as to Jenkinson. Only Garner still was troubled, because the living situation, his love with Janet, in which he had come back to real life stood now before the necessity of decisions – no longer decisions between himself and his beloved, but decisions on things that stood between them and an outer world, a world that instinct told him was hostile to their love.

Jenkinson gently, caressingly, stirred the sugar in his coffee.

'Well, and what are you young people's plans? You see, Miss Godson, I ought to run up to Warsaw to-day as ever is, and Garner had arranged to go with me. But now. . . .'

His smile was kind. His lips, though thin, curved pleasantly. He beamed first on one, then on the other. But before either could speak he went on quickly, pointing his words at the girl.

'Of course the arrangements you two make are none of my affair, but as far as travelling arrangements with Garner go I must have some idea what's afoot.'

Garner was sheepish, confused. He had not told Janet a thing of his English life, because over it all he had, in his own mind, drawn a heavy veil. It was agonizing to have Jenkinson pull that veil aside.

'We haven't quite decided,' he said. 'Had you really finally decided to go to Warsaw to-day?'

He was even too blissful to be suspicious, yet he certainly could not remember saying he would go on to Warsaw so early.

'Not finally,' Jenkinson said. 'But you remember I said we might have to hurry on to-day, especially if we're to get back in time.'

At the words get back Garner's face hardened.

'Perhaps you'd rather I left you and went on by myself. If I have to come back this way I could pick you up – or we could join up in Berlin. By the way, when is it you have to be in town for that Burroughs case?'

Garner frowned. He turned scarlet. Janet was most interested and amused and leant forward, her elbows on the table, her hands supporting her chin.

Garner knew how much everything depended on that business going well. He had months of work to pick up. He toyed with his coffee spoon, drawing little rivulets of coffee on the saucer through the mess of cigarette ash he had made there. He looked at the girl out of the corner of his eye. He cursed her because she was so cool and collected.

'Let me see,' he began airily, 'To-day is. . . .'

'Friday, May the twenty-eighth,' Jenkinson supplied, gently but firmly.

'Er. . . . I suppose I really ought to be back on Tuesday week, then.'

A long silence followed this. It was Janet Godson broke it.

'If that is the difficulty,' she said, clearly and precisely, 'it

may be simpler than it seems. If I had not met Hugh I should have been going back to town myself at the end of this week. I have been staying here with my uncle, you see, Mr Jenkinson. But now I can't quite see what we shall do.'

Before each of them was England; and neither knew in what way the other lived there. Their relations, their friends, his work – each at heart now felt were all obstacles to their love.

Jenkinson would have observed to them that they were very hasty young people, but the thought would have seemed so patronizing that he could not bring himself to say it – and yet at the same time was there any way of treating the business as a passing affair? It was no flippant infatuation. But the two had so far done nothing but bask in each other's sunshine without a thought of what they would do to-morrow.

Janet Godson lit another cigarette. She smiled across at Jenkinson, a little wryly.

'I've no doubt you're thinking we're a couple of first-class fools.'

'The Lord forbid!' he cried.

'Well, rather impractical and imprudent. . . .'

'The Lord forbid again! How could I think that when I don't know what your plans are? That's all that troubles me. But look here, it's half-past two already, and I've a lot to do. I'll put off Warsaw till the seven-thirty to-morrow morning. You'll excuse me now, and you'll do me the pleasure of dining with me to-night, and we'll talk things over. You see, Miss Godson, I'm sort of looking after him on this trip and I shall have to deliver a report to the people in Little Rickton, whether I get there with or without him.'

He laughed, as if it were a great joke. Then he was off, in a whirlwind of instructions to Garner as to how to find the little place they would dine in. He left the lovers to fight it out between themselves – and went leisurely back to the

hotel to read a novel and wait for Hugh to turn up before dinner, as he knew he would, to have it all out with him.

. . . . . .

Garner turned up a little before five. He went straight up to Jenkinson. It was perhaps a good thing he did not go to his own room first and find his suit-cases already packed and taken down – not so much because this would have infuriated him, as because it would have sent him on to Jenkinson with a feeling of being the injured party. As it was Garner felt a little foolish and came shamefaced. The change from yesterday's budding Don Juan to to-day's sighing swain is always difficult to carry off.

'Oh, it's you, is it?' Jenkinson cried, as if really astonished. 'I wondered who on earth it could be blundering in. I hadn't expected to see you till dinner.'

I don't see why it should be so extraordinary if I come back to the hotel.'

'Well, well, but Miss Godson?'

'I have no doubt Miss Godson has as much need to put on a different frock for dinner as I have to wash my hands.'

Garner's voice was strained.

'Sorry, old man,' said Jenkinson. 'To tell the truth, I should not have been surprised to find you'd both cleared off as fast as your heels or the Central European Airways could take you.'

'We'd like to, Jenkinson.'

'Well?'

'What do you mean by well?'

'Why not?'

But Garner did not reply. He went on biting his nails. Jenkinson waited patiently for him. It was a case for patience. He knew well enough Garner had come in specially to talk to him, and only patience would wear down his reluctance to

talk openly, show him how foolish it was to assume airs of indignation. At last he spoke.

'We're in a difficult position,' he said.

'The path of true love, eh?' Jenkinson said softly.

His voice was dull. Garner shot a mistrustful glance at him, but he found the usual kindly smile on his friend's lips, nothing of the sneer he expected and feared.

He did not know Jenkinson's thoughts.

'What are you going to do, then?' Jenkinson asked. There was sympathy and friendship in his voice, as if there was no reason at all for him to reproach Garner for falling into the trap he had warned him against. Warned him, of course, on general principles. But man (which Jenkinson was the first to recognize), works not by general principles. Man works by the particular thing under his nose.

Then Garner explained all the difficulties that Jenkinson knew already. Uppermost in Garner's mind appeared to be the financial difficulties – that he had scarcely any income beyond what he earned, and for all the idealism in the world that Janet could put into her love he knew they could not live, England or continent, without money. And beyond this barrier of his to return to England and to Rickton, the only place where he could earn money at his age, his thought seemed to be blank.

'I don't know what we're going to do,' he said at last, hopelessly, when he had put it all before Jenkinson. He looked appealingly at Jenkinson, while he plucked at his fingers, cracking the dry joints.

It was growing dusk outside, and the room was now lit only by the rusty gleams that came from the brilliantly lighted street beyond the curtains.

'That's what I want your advice about.'

'Folks a bit stiff at home, eh, especially in a rabbit hole like our little town?'

'Oh, that's out of the question,' Garner cried impatiently.

'It is difficult, then, isn't it?' was all Jenkinson offered, for consolation or advice.

They were both silent a long time again. Each was thinking of how the other must look on the situation. Again Jenkinson patiently waited for Garner to speak. Hugh Garner held his peace, but at last the silence squeezed the words from him.

'Look here, Jenkinson,' – his face was white – 'humbug aside, man to man, what would you do if you were in my position?'

'Isn't that a little difficult for me to answer?' was all Jenkinson's reply.

Garner looked fiercely at him.

'I'm not asking you to tell me what you would do if you were Jenkinson, but if you were me. I had relied on you for friendly advice,' he said bitterly.

'Am I withholding it, my dear fellow? Why read into my words what isn't there? All I meant was – a little difficult for me to answer when I don't know the real state of both your affections.'

'The state of our affections is pretty bad. Right to bedrock,' Hugh said, with obvious, ominous sincerity.

'Mark you, Garner,' Jenkinson replied, 'I don't doubt your faith and I don't doubt hers, or the capability of either of you for affection, but it has been a little quick, hasn't it?'

'It has,' Garner said, in utter gloom.

So gloomily he said it that in spite of himself Jenkinson smiled.

'But that makes it only all the worse. It's been a thunderclap to us both. I've never been more serious in my life.'

'Quite,' said Jenkinson, 'that's what I wanted to get at,' – but he stopped short, and again the silence dragged on till Garner could stand it no longer.

At last the words broke from him.

'Well, what am I to do?'

'You really want to hear my advice?'

'Yes!'

'My advice, then, I must tell you is not moulded either by financial circumstances or by the gossip of Rickton. One must have a code in life. My advice is, unless you seriously contemplate marriage – "cut it out." Take to your heels!'

Garner stared blankly at him.

'Though marriage, mark you, as I've always told you, is in my opinion the finest thing in the matter of women – but it needs contemplation and, as far as my observation has gone, a firm spirit.'

. . . . . .

They said no more on the matter. What more was there to say? After a few minutes more of gnawing at his finger-nails and scowling Garner's face lifted a little. He got up.

'Thanks!' he said, and made for the door.

'See you at dinner, then?'

The door closed and he was gone.

Jenkinson but vaguely guessed at the turmoil his advice had caused. Garner had expected him to say 'cut it out,' or none of my business, or take the girl to England and fix her up somewhere in a flat; but he had not expected him to say 'marry her.' He had somehow forgotten that Jenkinson held as his third chapter of conduct that marriage was the only ideal state of relations for men and women, if their relations were not frankly transitory, frankly surface. It would have been much easier to do anything foolish if Jenkinson had scoffed, opposed him, pooh-poohed the affair, belittled the girl, goaded him.

Hugh Garner, dressing for dinner, sat long enough listless before his dressing-table, not because he was making a fine toilet for the occasion, but because while standing by the mirror his mind had so risen to revolt, overwhelming him

with more than he could at that moment bear, that he had dropped into the chair by his side.

He felt a storm in his brain rising and overpowering him, and he fought obstinately against it. Janet Godson for his wife, and he so shortly a widower and murderer in one. To what had he come? Going to bed with cocottes was in itself a betrayal, if not of Lilian's memory at least of that upright Hugh Garner he had saved from the rope, but this was infinitely worse. Was it then merely to make way for others that he had done Lilian in?

There was the prick, and that inner man, whom he thought had been put to sleep for ever while he lay at Pratts' farm, and whose more or less dead body he had finally spurned into a corner since with the assistance of Jill French and Jenkinson he had broken from England and ghosts, showed itself there in the dusty darkness, stirred, coming to life, and any minute would rise and confront him and menace him.

For this evening at least he must fight it down.

Eventually the lateness of the hour saved him. He wrenched on his clothes, buttons confusing, studs slipping. The very physical effort he had to make to arrive at their table, though still five minutes after Janet and Jenkinson had come, forced that accuser, that marplot other self of us that we split men contain, that marplot self called conscience, back into the dark recess of his unexplored mind.

Alarm at what – in those few minutes he was late – Jenkinson might have said to Janet helped to restore his sanity and balance. Like any other foolish lover once his blood began to flood in him, he felt his Janet, with her wide-set eyes smiling at him under her dark brows, was his very creation. He leapt forward at once to defend this lovely thing that he had made. Before him lay the terrible possibility of losing her. The future was a black gulf, in which catastrophe awaited.

XV

But in life – except, indeed, for the explosive suddenness of passions grandly concealed and the developments of schizophrenic insanity, when a man just goes off without any warning apparent to the layman – nothing ever happens with that dramatic abruptness we like to imagine. Hugh Garner and Janet Godson, in spite of Jenkinson's efforts, only half-faced their future. They just drifted, rapidly and almost insensibly, into full intimacy, lover and mistress.

. . . . . .

'It is not, my love, that I want to try to bind you, tie you down, trap you into always being mine,' pleaded Garner, 'but you know how hard people will make it for you . . . your people. . . .'

'Is it the world, is it my people love you?' she asked, in reply. 'Will that ceremony and contract add to our love, and is that not the only reality we want it for?'

'It is only my prudence, my experience of people's back-biting ways. . . .'

'Is that, then, what counts for us?'

And in face of that, then, could it be expected that he would go on pleading for false forms, struggle against the living reality of their mutual passion? And, plunged again in this, he found himself alive; and in the struggle against the death that dragged behind him it seemed to him that he was again triumphant.

Before he had to be back in Rickton there were ten days; less before Janet's people – father and paternal aunts, – expected her back in London. The sun was to shine for them but a short time more and they made hay with a will.

Garner went on to Warsaw with Jenkinson, and Janet

Godson went too. She had been staying in Vienna with a maternal uncle, but he was a broad-minded Austrian, and any extraordinary liberties she took were benignly put down to her English blood and her English upbringing. She discovered an old school friend in Warsaw, with whom she had to spend a long week-end.

But at last came the day when Janet absolutely ought to start back (if she was not to rouse suspicion or alarm or hurt her Vienna uncle's feelings), and something had to be decided, and it was characteristic of his new mood that Garner could only be brought to face the coming days without Janet when they were together with Jenkinson. They were sitting in a café under the restful trees of the Aleia Jeruzolimska when Garner brought himself to face the facts.

'I see now what to do,' he suddenly announced.

Jenkinson and Janet had been trying to talk across his austere silence – about the Catholic Church. They stared at him when he interrupted.

'My mind is made up – if you will, Janet.'

She smiled at him.

'If I will what?' she asked.

He ignored her question.

'Look here,' he said, 'we can't go on drifting like this, can't go on drifting. Just lead everything to a miserable end.'

'Well?'

She was grave.

Jenkinson tipped his chair back from the table, and watched the passers-by. As if to make a discreet barrier between himself and their conversation he puffed great clouds of white, pungent smoke from the Polish gaspers he was smoking.

'No, no,' Hugh cried. 'This is for you to hear too, Jenkinson. No hole in the corner business for us.'

He shivered suddenly, violently, as if a bout of marsh fever had taken him.

'Eh? Janet?'

'Of course,' she said. 'What are we to do?'

'You must go back to your uncle to-morrow. In order to be together we must separate for a while. I depend on my practice – well, then I must stick to it and make something of it, and as soon as I set foot in England I start to work to make something of it – and carry it out of that choking little hole Rickton.'

'And I?' Janet asked.

'When you come back next month we shall see each other in town. I shall have an office there soon enough, I hope. I'm going to work. I've a scheme. I'm not just going to sit in Rickton all my life. I'm going to do something pretty big or nothing. And then we shall see, then we shall see.'

He then looked at Jenkinson. There was scorn in Jenkinson's patient, clear eyes. Jenkinson frowned slightly.

Sullenly, doggedly, Garner asked, 'I'm a free man, am I not? If I can succeed in making the sort of life Janet and I want, am I not free to do it?'

There was a note of desperation appeared in his voice. He was painfully aware of Jenkinson's disapproval of their unhallowed union.

Jenkinson shrugged his shoulders.

'Not for me to interfere, is it?' he asked. The words were hard, but his smile was kind.

And after some silence they turned, reticently, to discussing Wagner. They simply had to go that night – the Valkyrie was on – to make an occasion of it, Janet declared.

It was not till Garner was alone with Jenkinson that Jenkinson spoke out.

'Look here, Garner,' he said, 'you know what a high opinion

I have of Janet. You know what I think about your affection – both yours and hers. I can't for the life of me, understand why, if you succeed in doing all you want with your practice, at least, you don't marry.'

'We never shall understand each other there,' was Garner's reply, 'and so why should we waste words trying. I believe we two can manage better without marrying, and you don't – that's all.'

'You surprise me,' Jenkinson replied, 'that's all I can say. So unnecessarily courageous, and so blind.'

Courageous – yes. But not in the way Jenkinson thought. Courageous because, escaping in his rejuvenating love for Janet from his horrible dead double life, with his return to England Garner began another double life even more exacting. He no longer cared for what Rickton thought – no longer had any fears that if they saw him anyhow but mourning Lilian they would suspect he had murdered her; but from the very first days of his return to work his separation from Janet, his seeing her only surreptitiously at week-ends, like a criminal, agonized him. And the more, too, that she became necessary to him, for he lived by her and for her, the more, once back in England, did he feel a horrible itch within him, both a desire and a compulsion, to tell at least *her* everything, thus to become really one with her. Then, it seemed (were that only possible), he would not care one jot of what the outer world thought of them or how that stood between them.

But of course he could not tell her, and all he could do was plunge into work and try to drown his uneasiness in work; because, too, by success in his work would contact with her be made more materially possible.

Janet's relations had wind of their union. They moved all in their power, but the only weapon they had was bringing gentle, unostentatious pressure to bear on Janet.

'Thank God,' Janet said to Garner on one occasion, 'they will never go to the length of making a public scandal of it, because of Uncle Simon. It would be just the last blow to him, and though they're all waiting for him to die, of course, they couldn't bear to think they'd hastened it; and they couldn't make trouble and keep it from him because he counts on seeing me at least once a week, and they know very well that if they stir a finger I wouldn't go near one of the family, not even him.'

Janet's pretence had been study, and the need for seclusion for study. It was not easy to impress on her aunts the need for having a room of her own somewhere, for being independent. Why should an unmarried girl, they thought, be independent? and Janet found out, after some weeks, that they had actually spied on her and followed her and found that the room she had in secret was really a flat much too large for her humble allowance to rent.

But they were actually too terrified of the truth even to make a decent protest; and as long as the girl's *downfall* which they probably never really admitted to themselves was not known to the outer world they would not disown her. Relations between Janet and her family became established on a basis of compromise. The family loved the wayward girl more by family duty than by spontaneous love. For that reason it was easy to turn a blind eye to her extraordinarily advanced conduct, and to continue calling her *Janet darling*.

. . . . . .

Meanwhile Hugh Garner fought hard for their existence. The expense of his new way of life was so great that it alone would have forced him to look for something more remunerative than a mere solicitor's practice in Rickton.

Fortune played into the vague plan he had formed that morning in Warsaw sitting in Grobowski's café. An estate

of the sort he wanted became available. Old Heathcote out at Little Blaydon died, and his widow, a Cumberland woman, wanted to go back to her home county for her last days, and put up the Moat Farm for sale. This happened three weeks after Garner's homecoming.

The farm wasn't much of an asset as farm – the old building went back only about two hundred years – the one that preceded it had been burned down – and it was largely built on the simple frame and claylump principle, which makes for warmth, but certainly not for value on the market. All the same there was some nice old timber in it. That's why it was the sort of place that is a death-trap to the poor fellow who kids himself that a little renovation will do wonders. Places like that absorb far more than their original value, and at the end are still apt to be draughty, damp round the skirting and inconveniently divided up. The estate agents knew all that very well – and so, of course, did Garner, who had been Heathcote's lawyer. It is understandable, then, that the agents were delighted when Garner made a ridiculously lavish offer before the sale was due. They did not know that he had got it for what he considered, from his point of view, a mere song.

There were seven hundred acres of land, but only about two hundred under the plough. The rest was barren heath land, cut through by a little valley with a river neither wide enough for sailing on nor swift enough for driving anything. But Garner saw beyond all that. From Rickton out to the Colemore Ironworks, of which Jenkinson was one of the directors, ran a branch line for goods only, and this line actually ran across the heath of the Moat Farm lands. On this goods line, one of the drawbacks of the property to the ordinary buyer, Garner counted for his success. His scheme was officially advertised towards the end of that year. He

launched out as a house builder. On the estate he proposed a group of villas, out-of-town houses of various sizes, with the old manor house turned into a sort of clubhouse. With every house were to go large and pleasant gardens. The little river, widened, cleared, diverted where necessary and dabbled with, would drive a small dynamo in the rainy seasons – a little power house on the lower edge of the estate. Above the weir the widened reach would take canoes and punts. There were too, all sorts of little schemes – such as that of planting fruit trees of all possible kinds everywhere, not only in gardens, but by the roadside – for ornament, for shade and for fruit. All the trees were to be looked after by the estate gardener, and the demands of the tenants first satisfied, at the lowest wholesale market prices, while the remainder would be sold by the estate. This innovation was to prove a source of steady income to the estate.

Hugh Garner began the preliminary work without delay, that very autumn. The thought that with every cubic yard of soil moved he was so much the nearer being able to do as he wanted by Janet, and make their secret relations materially more easy, spurred him on. Plunging into the work did much to stop that ache at heart. All the winter through he was at it, in breeches and high boots, with the men who were doing the work – the displaced labourers of the Moat Farm. The men seemed to get over their hostility to the change when Garner promised them safe and permanent work, new cottages, and, as soon as the enterprise began to pay, a good rise in wages. Garner set out, in fact to make himself popular – to enter Little Blaydon life and not be only a foreigner to the village or a mere Ricktonite come out to make profit of it.

The Little Blaydon folk were not slow to see on which side their bread was buttered. They grew blinder and blinder to what displeased them and doted more and more on whatever

pleased them in the eccentric Rickton lawyer. In fact, they were glad and not contemptuous or carping when he took part in their Christmas festivities – and played a laborious part in the play at the Little Blaydon Annual Entertainment.

But at first, in spite of these efforts consciously made, Garner cared little enough about Little Blaydon. It cannot be too much emphasized that the Garner estate was nothing more to Hugh Garner at first than a means of making more money, not merely to cover his increased expenditure at the moment, but to be able to open an office in London, and keep Rickton on merely as a provincial branch – to be able to live permanently with Janet in that enormous town where they could be free of envious and accusing eyes and yet not have to live in a round of petty deceits and concealments.

. . . . . .

With Garner's return home in the early summer that year had coincided Jill French's husband's long leave, and so she had then left her brother-in-law. It was a convenient coincidence. He abandoned the house where he had lived with Lilian and let it on long lease and took up residence in the Royal Hotel in Rickton. This made him freer in his movements, though a feeling of guilt irked him more than he liked to admit when he told the hotel people and his architect or clients that on Saturday he would not be available – that business called him to town. At the same time the constant unrest of his journeys to and fro, his cares on the estate, his intoxication with Janet kept him fully alive. He was transformed from a living corpse to a demon of action. Christmas he sacrificed to his boy John's holidays and to the Little Blaydon Annual Concert and Entertainment. For nearly three weeks he did not see Janet, and yet, although his heart ached for her, he did not notice the days. He was a man in a dream.

'What a changed man Garner is,' was said of him.

'Got over his wife's death at last, poor fellow.'
'Sad affair.'
'Took it badly.'
'Going abroad did him good. Made a break.'

XVI

But at last the spring came. Even when the sky was overcast and a drizzling rain filled the air with a sort of mist, the bare branches of the trees on the Moat Farm lands shone with a greenish yellow glow as if there was a strange and wonderful new sun lighting them. Along the sheltered little valley the apricots, planted in the autumn, came to their first pink bloom; and ten days later the air was heavy with the blooming cherries.

The spring had come, and the Garner Estate scheme was put before the public. The response was vastly better than Garner had dared to hope. The sudden release of tension and anxiety freed Garner's mind, locked up throughout the winter with the cares and risks of the estate. This freedom and the spring odours let all the flood of Garner's regained vitality pour over into his love for Janet.

He had come out of the winter dream, and it began to seem all the wrong way round for him to leave Little Blaydon, most week-ends in that lovely spring, and for him and Janet to bury their love, enjoyed in broken, stolen week-ends, in the most cumbersome of all cities. It began to seem foolish that she should not see and enjoy Blaydon where so much, since the past autumn, had been done by him. For Blaydon was no longer a mere means to income. It was *his*, a growing thing.

'Come down to Blaydon,' he pleaded, though as he pleaded he felt he was moving on thin ice; that somewhere was concealed a horrible risk if he was seen in Rickton with her. She thought so too, though her reasons were not the same.

'Don't forget,' she told him, 'that Blaydon is your own country, that everyone knows you there, that every eye will

be on you and on me if you bring me down. What a stranger could have done without the least trouble will be the topic of the day in Rickton and in Blaydon if you do it.'

A dizzy fear took possession of him when she said things like that. There was something lurking in the dark recesses of his thought, but he struggled and mastered it and kept it hidden.

Yet he badly wanted her to be there, in the very heart of the lovely little town he was making in Little Blaydon. He thought he discovered a way, and tried to persuade her to pretend to take a house there in the estate. He pointed out that she could take it as a perfect stranger through the agents in town.

'What more natural,' he declared, 'than that I should make your acquaintance there, fall in love with you there. Even Rickton could not object to that!'

She laughed gaily at this childish plotting.

'But what more unnatural, my dear ass,' she replied, 'than that I, Janet Godson, spinster of twenty-five years of age, should take a desirable residence planned for a family of ten, all for myself! No, it won't do, it won't do. Things must go on like this until you can come to live permanently in town.'

When she said this it seems he first remembered with a cold shock that it was only for that – only to be able to live in town, – that he had done it all. Only as a means to an end had he planned and built and planted and sown that green, flowering hillside and little valley. Too late he realized that the means had become an end in itself, that the district and the village, even in those incredibly short months, had grown into him, that he craved to be at peace to see it grow and change and watch the seasons come and go, and not to be a nomad in a town flat. And worst of all was the craving to set Janet Godson there amid it all.

In vain Janet struggled. In vain she recalled what her life principle had been. In vain she protested that she had sworn never to tie herself, her life with another life.

'Would you then think it better to cause another death, a living death; if you love me, two other living deaths?' Hugh cried, when for the fiftieth time she had refused to consider his plan.

In his eyes Janet saw a wild, hunted look.

'What do you mean, Hugh?' she asked quietly, but very firmly.

'I mean that life without you is not life, that. . . .'

'But you *have* me."

She smiled.

'Yes, but here in this foul town, secretly, crookedly.'

'Then it is the town you think of and what people say of us – and not of me,' she said.

Only the gentleness of her speech softened the defensive woman's hardness of her thought.

'You know that is not true, Janet, not fair.'

She relented.

'Let us take a cottage in the country,' she said.

'But why should we, Janet, when we have more than a cottage at Blaydon? Is it sensible?'

Does she not care what I have been doing down there? he asked himself, with sudden pain.

'Yes, Hugh dear, it is sensible, if marriage is the only way to Blaydon,' she said. He did not reply for some time.

Then all he said, bitterly, was:

'You have not even once seen all I have been working at and planning and living by, for us, all these months.'

. . . . . .

In vain Janet struggled.

Against her own convictions was her own inner fear, as ally

to Hugh. The more insistent he became and the more she felt that he was set on the complete outward union of their lives the more she came to realize dimly, through that fear in her, that he had grown part of her, in just the same way of slow accretion that the estate seemed to have grown part of him. The fear in her was the fear that in the end she would lose him. Did she really end by convincing herself that in marriage she could not lose him?

. . . . . .

They were married in August. Because at last he felt he had conquered and won Janet he was a man beside himself with joy. He now lived for their marriage alone, and seemed quite oblivious of his own recent weariness and abhorrence of marriage. With his marriage to Janet, and with her acceptance in Rickton and Blaydon there could be no question but that the dead past was walled away from him for ever, that the chill of Lilian's dead body could no longer cramp him and keep him from defying the false human laws of retribution that glorify death rather than condemn it.

. . . . . .

The whole of his world took it without much surprise; and there were strikingly few carping comments. The general idea seemed to be that a wife was almost indispensable to Garner, not only for social reasons, a sort of standby to him in his business career, but – almost indispensable, in fact – for bringing up his son. And Janet entered into it all wholeheartedly. Once she had burned her boats behind her she gave herself to her husband completely. She expected him to do the same to her; thought that was the reason for which he wanted marriage; and fully believed he was doing so. So did he for a time.

He at first believed it, because the first weeks of their married life were in every way but a continuation of their

previous unmarried life together – for though they were together all the time, instead of only at intervals, each day had something new in it. For Janet there was the estate to inspect, Rickton people to meet; and for Hugh there was the estate to show her, the Rickton people to show her to; and then there was the casting of final arrangements for their house before they went abroad for a whole six weeks in Janet's beloved Vienna.

Little John, Garner's boy, had gone away for summer holidays with the Coventrys. They were very kind and helpful. They felt sure the full-blooded little boy would be in the way of the young bride and bridegroom; and Garner, for his part, was sure that he welcomed the removal of any bar to his enjoyment of bringing Janet to Blaydon. On this triumphant return was his whole thought centred.

. . . . . .

In the crystal and dry air of the continental autumn they had a marvellous time, and it was hard to both of them to believe that it was now over a year since they had first met there, so fresh did the memories of those days seem to them, so utterly unchanged was it all. Never had Hugh Garner, in his exultation at his re-won life, been so boyishly eager, delighted, even frolicsome.

But at last the time came for them to come home.

In October they settled finally in their house, on the extreme edge of the estate. It was cut off by a copse from the bulk of the other houses, but from the upper windows, through the upper branches of the trees, glints of the little river below them could be had, and from Hugh's own room, a long room with sloping roof in the attic, was a view of nearly the whole estate. Just over a week after their return November-like drizzle set in. The autumn leaves, ready to fall, rotted at their sockets and detached themselves from

their twigs and spread the ground with a dank mass. As the branches bared, the chimneys and then bit by bit the roofs and gables of the other houses became visible from the upper floor; and eventually even the wind-wrinkled little river showed clearly from the attic window.

But it was not this glimpse of autumn river that consciously brought gloom back to Garner's mind. It was the way in which, now he was established in a house with her and they were man and wife, to everybody round them, comparison with Lilian, that had never worried him before they were married, began to force itself on him at every turn. Before, she had been merely his beloved, his beloved of the Vienna morning, his Janet; but now she became so obviously *the one that followed Lilian.*

For this, it almost seemed, he had murdered Lilian. For what? For Janet gently to call him *dear* over the breakfast-table.

What nonsense – as if he was not above such shallow comparisons. What nonsense – as if he, who had fought out so much and gone through such agonies of mind, in order to get down to bedrock, was taking the form for the reality, the outward appearance for the inward truth! But there it was, and against his weary will, almost as if aided by that will contrary to that will's intention, he sank deeper and deeper into gloom – became again, day by day, more and more moody.

And Janet, who could not but notice it, tried to help him, for she guessed it was memories of the departed that troubled him. She was no fool, and knew well enough that, however little predisposition there was in him to be carpingly domestically critical of her, he could not but see her in some sense balanced against his first wife. She did all she could to guide him past such trying situations.

Poor girl, she could not know that her very efforts made things worse. But as she had no reason to expect this she did not observe that at times that strained, artificial and sometimes cruelly distracted manner in Hugh came when she was kindest to him and, thinking to spare him pain, was overcareful to avoid reference to the first wife. A good example of the sort of thing was the occasion on Lilian's birthday (February the twenty-third) when Jill French sent him flowers to put on the grave. (She had been buried, as her people wanted it, in Rickton).

Jill had arranged it all before. It had been a sort of vow between her and Garner made on the February the twenty-third of the year before, when Jill was keeping house for him, that every year Lilian should have the special flowers she always liked on her birthday (early narcissus) piled on her grave. And at that time Hugh had felt that this was a little enough thing, for Jill French's sake rather than for his dead wife's, for him to promise to do.

The flowers were brought over by the Frenchs' gardener on his motor-cycle in the afternoon of the day before. The evening of that day when these flowers arrived was unusually sombre. Hugh had told Janet of the arrangement and of course she perfectly understood. She was most gentle, most kind, for she made every effort to efface herself. She put her whole loving being into making tact something more than polite dissemblance; to make it into an act of understanding love, to show she was part of him in his sorrow. She could not know, poor girl, that she understood nothing at all.

Ever since he had decided to persuade Janet Godson to marry him Hugh Garner had known at the back of his mind that this sort of situation would have to be faced, but this business of the flowers on her grave was the first occasion on which he really came up against it. Throughout that evening

when these flowers came and were carefully put in water by Janet, every time he saw Janet pass through the room in which he sat, moodily thinking, though pretending to read a book, and every time he saw her neat, composed, kind, retiring, discreet expression he felt – oh, how unreasonably – that he detested her for it.

But then to him, we must realize, every gesture of hers that was an admission of consciousness and acceptance of his first wife was for him a finger accusing him of murder. For, if he was to live the silence on which he had decided once and for all time, up there in the Pratts' bedroom overlooking the fateful River Culley, every gesture he made he was obliged in self-protection to make as if that first wife had never been. Every unguarded gesture that recognized her memory stood between him and Janet, between him and life, was an affirmation of her ghost between them. And, for the living, ghosts are malignant.

But because reason told him it was the only sane way out, because a second death does not undo a first, because the ancient doctrine of an eye for an eye and so on is a stupid and un-Christian one (he had fought it all out in the Pratts' bedroom), – because, too, he must save his son from the stigma of being a murderer's son – once he had taken that load of concealment he must, he knew, go forward on that road, however hard the going. His English backbone, Cromwell backbone, made him stick to it. No man putting his hand to the plough – that was Christian, that was Christian uprightness, for him. He did not then trouble to think that the ruthlessness of those words, the dead straightness of them, belonged not to Maccabean days and the decadence that followed, but to the older age when man took an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth; and that that was perhaps why the Cromwell men so revelled in the pre-Christian books, the

history of an austere struggle, in an austere land beneath an austere sky, with an austere god.

. . . . . .

It was this situation of being caught between his own willed hardness and that ghost which haunted him brought his first great misunderstanding with living Janet. On that morning when he was to go on his self-accepted pilgrimage to Lilian's grave with her sister's and his own flowers, because he wanted to make the lugubrious revival of memories into an ordinary everyday thing, and have the living there to defend him against the dead, he persuaded himself, of all extraordinary things, that Janet would go with him.

At breakfast he said:

'I shall see Mortimer after going down to church.' (Mortimer was the estate electrician.)

He looked sideways at Janet.

Her expression was a sweet, even motherly expression of submission and sympathy.

'I thought about ten minutes would be the time there. . . .' he said. Because of his fixed idea that she would go too he instinctively skirted any reference to her going, because he feared she might not.

Just after nine he was ready to start. (They would take the car down). But Janet was not to be seen. He waited for her. He fidgeted about in the hall while he waited. Of course he was conscious that something was wrong. Still, he called out, 'You there, Janet?' Her voice floated from her room in answer, gently, 'Com-ing!' She did not ask what he wanted. Not to trouble him in any way on this painful morning she tripped lightly down stairs to him. Then with a shock he saw that she was not dressed at all for going out.

'I'm ready,' he said, rather bluntly.

'Well, you'll see Mortimer, then. . . .' she began.

'But I shall miss him if we don't start soon,' he cried.

'But I'm not to come, am I, Hugh?' she asked, softly. She laid her white fingers on the lapel of his coat.

'I . . . I . . . thought. . . .' he stammered.

'Why, Hugh,' she was forced to expostulate. There was a painful pause. Then, 'I will if you really want me to. . . . I only thought it would be a little strange. . . .'

But before he knew where he was with his thoughts a fit of the old impatience had enveloped him in darkness. In helpless, agonized gesture he half-raised both arms. He gave a sort of gasp, and then without a word he strode off down the path, stepped into the car, and drove off.

Janet stood watching him as he went. She was amazed; yes, hurt a little; but most of all she was grieved and sorry. She shook her head slowly and sadly as she went indoors.

'Poor old boy,' she thought, 'how he must still feel it. I must try to be more tactful another time something like this that reminds him of her arises.'

It only seemed strange to her that little John's Christmas holidays with them had gone by without a trace of pain in him – strange that the boy did not raise painful memories, while putting some flowers on her grave, under a vow to her sister, did. But her passive mind accepted the way everything in life was like that, topsy-turvy, and she was satisfied.

XVII

It was in horrible despair that Hugh Garner gradually came to see that with every effort Janet made to heal the wound she thought he had at heart she more and more resembled that Lilian who had so exasperated him. The resemblance came out most vividly in her tacit decision, indeed her power, to rise above any jealousy she might have for the undying love that she obviously imagined him to have for Lilian. That she showed such astounding greatness of love but made things worse, for the gulf between them seemed by this to be made but greater.

At last the day came when Hugh Garner sadly recognized that their love for each other was of two different kinds. Idly he began to wonder if the difference was not a fundamental one between man and woman, not merely between him and Lilian, him and Janet, though this abstract speculation promised no relief. In his love there was an austerity to which, in her, corresponded that mixture of submissiveness and nobility of sacrifice which was gradually (though he hardly admitted it to himself) making him hate Janet with an even fiercer hatred than he had ever had for Lilian. This new hatred, deep repressed within him, festered. Forces beyond his control seemed to be defeating him, and not only did he begin to withdraw into a shell himself – but he also began to estrange Janet, who felt clearer and clearer as time went on that either he did not love her at all or he was determined never to reveal part of his heart to her.

Things in the Garner household, in fact, went from bad to worse. Even the birth of a daughter and then, at the end of the fourth year, of a son, did nothing to mend them. But if the birth of a second child, and that a son too, did not in

itself mend things, it did at least bring Hugh Garner to face the question; realize that this second marriage, into which he had put, not his callow youth, but, with mature thought, all his fully-grown being, was on the road to ruin.

Once again, yet once again, he set himself to fight things out within himself, and then in a desperate hope he made an almost superhuman effort at least to put Janet and himself on some road from which they would neither of them need more to diverge.

Since he had married Janet he had never been down *there*. If he went there with Janet, he thought, and if down there she saw that no memories of Lilian tormented him would she not believe, feel, finally, that in dead Lilian she had no rival, as he was now sure she suspected she had. For in his blindness he thought some such fear in her must be one of the obstacles to their happiness. And for himself too it would be a test; for if there, with Janet, he could become again that natural self he had so long ceased to be, if, in fact, he could at last learn to bear his burden in silence on his uncongenial road to death he would, even if he only succeeded in creating a permanent mask for himself that would appear natural, have found at last a way of living sanely and well.

. . . . . .

He did not tell Janet why he picked on Thorton to go fishing that autumn, the fifth from their marriage, the seventh from the murder of Lilian. But at the same time he made no attempt to guide her thoughts away from that fact he could see fascinated her, that Thorton was only six miles from where it happened. As soon as he proposed it she consented. He could see that she consented as she did to many a thing now – to avoid countering him; but yet this index of how far their estrangement had gone did not deter him. He could see that in this visit she already saw some

ominous connection with her predecessor. The atmosphere for triumph or tragedy was there before they started, for they came very near to open harsh dissent about John, her boy, Lilian's boy – who was now at the difficult age of fourteen.

It was the question of whether they should take the children. Of course their youngest, their one year old son; Janet would never consent to leave him to the cares of a nurse. And there seemed no difficulty about taking the girl, her girl, now five. It was at taking John that she stuck. She knew the boy knew all about the accident now, and she simply could not face taking that young growing creature, in any case troubled enough with himself and his own preoccupations at school, down so near the scene of his mother's death – let him see poor Hugh (she always thought of him now as 'poor Hugh') let him see his father brood over it all.

'Not your boy, Hugh,' she pleaded.

It was with never a hint of coldness, but merely of love for him, that she called Lilian's child that.

'But why not, Janet?'

Patience, sorely tried too many times, grows shorter.

'Hugh, I think you might know why,' she said.

Her voice was dry.

'Rubbish,' he said. 'You're thinking of his mother. Rubbish.'

And then she made no reply.

'Why, you don't want the boy to grow up morbid, do you? Anyway, I can't see any reason why one of the best rivers for fishing in should be tabu to me just because. . . .'

'Shhh! Hugh boy,' she cried.

She took him by the arm and turned him towards the sun-splashed french window. His callousness did not shock her. For herself she welcomed it heartily enough. It was a sign he loved her and not the dead woman's shadow; but yet at the

same time for some stupid reason it hurt her and pained her. She was no longer that matter-of-fact slapdash young female who had been breezily ready to take a decision of prime importance to her life while sitting with a stranger in a café.

She shrank back in instinctive mother fear from the way in which (in anything that seemed mixed in his mind with his first wife) her Hugh insisted on riding roughshod over everybody else. But now, in this matter of the boy, she gently submitted, as she always did.

This visit was to be the test. Garner made up his mind when he first decided they should all go down there; and the test it indeed turned out to be. Two incidents, that occurred on two successive tawny September days, more or less decided things and made a sharp turning point in their lives. The first was on the very bridge where he had murdered Lilian.

Garner knew, as they made their way to that bridge (the children left for the day, for once, entirely to the care of the governess), that this at last was what he had waited for all those years. As they strode through the curiously familiar landscape he sneered inwardly at himself, taunting himself cruelly that this was the good old way of the murderer who does the thing in petty passion, and then passes through a purgatory of remorse till at last he goes back to haunt the scene of his crime. But though the circumstances did, in all truth, seem a little like that, his was none the less something more than a mere mechanical attraction of remorse. He was trying hard to get some living advantage from it, to rid himself if he could once and for all of the harshness and strain his burden of silence gave him.

And the day was passing well. Not a cloud had blotched its autumnal serenity. They had both some fine specimens in their creels; and somehow the peaceful scene, the very absence of the horror and violence in it that he had half-

feared, and Janet's sane, gentle companionship, had made him begin to feel he had conquered at last – when that dream of peace was shattered.

They were sitting actually on the bridge itself – exactly as he and Lilian had been seven years before. He was absorbed in his thoughts and because his thoughts had become unwontedly calm and peaceful he was so absorbed that he entirely lost his critical faculty of observing others; and forgot that this very serenity, this calm, this lack of that habitual moroseness in him, must strike Janet as something unusual. For she was, and he knew it, now no longer used to see him normal, as he had been for that brief first half-year of their life together. Yet now on this strangest occasion he was even more than normal, if normal is to mean calm, unmoved.

But it did more than strike her as unusual. It struck her to ner very marrow as an almost superhuman callousness, a callousness she had never believed him capable of; and so agonized was she at this culmination of callousness at the very hour when he had seemed to find peace that she could bear it no longer.

She felt an absolutely irresistible need to do what she had never done – mention his dead wife herself, of her own free accord. She must get to the bottom of this sudden serenity after almost perpetual moroseness; in a moment when she could only have expected greater gloom. And though she felt what a dangerous thing, for their happiness, it was to do, the impulse in her grew till she could resist it no longer.

She spoke softly.

'Hugh dear,' she asked, 'was it not from this very bridge that she. . . .'

'Yes, it was,' he answered curtly and coldly.

In an instant the painfully attained serenity was gone.

'What of that?'

'Nothing at all, dear Hugh. Only I felt I must speak plainly some time. . . .'

'Well?'

Why did she not get on with it? Why did she feel her way? Was he not glad that she was going to speak plainly?

'You never have spoken a word to me of her, and I often wonder what is at the bottom of your mind. You *are* a bit inhuman, you know, boy.'

She often caressed him with this name.

Drily he laughed.

'Inhuman, am I? I don't think I am.'

'No, but still. . . .'

He turned fully to her, and interrupted her.

'She is dead,' he said, harshly and abruptly, 'isn't that enough?'

For a minute she made no sound, and then:

'What do you mean?' she asked, in a whisper.

'Isn't that enough to know about her? Will talking about her resurrect her, and,' – his voice rising as he spoke – 'do I want to resurrect her?'

He meant his words to be a renewed declaration of his living love for Janet; but so did he have to force himself to speak that they fell like icicles from his lips, and, harsh and brittle, shattered before her.

'Hugh. . . .' she whispered.

She pleaded – not for herself, but for him; for him to be human, for him to be weak, pained, grieving; anything, if only he would let her see he was harried by memories like other ordinary people.

'Do you want to have rivals so much, then?' he asked again, harshly and cruelly cold.

She noticed the beads of sweat on his forehead and in the little channel down his upper lip.

He stared hard and fixedly at her. Then, with a sneer, he finished his thought:

'That you even want dead ones?'

He was far past being able to realize how much such words could hurt her, dismay her, terrify her. But neither could she on her side see they were dictated by a love for her that was desperate, that for all its bitterness and stoniness was living love indeed. Though they were both aghast at their passion, neither understood the other. He was the first to recover himself.

He said softly, 'Janet dear, please forgive me for being so rough, you must know it is only because I want nothing to come between us, because I cannot bear the thought of divided love.'

Without raising her head she murmured something quite inaudible in reply.

He took her hand in his, and it was limp and lifeless, without response.

Their position was terrible, but in it she at least had sense enough to realize that nothing now she could say would be of avail. But after some minutes of vile tension the reaction came. Janet found herself asking him if he had already begun to use winter oil for his car.

'The nights are getting chilly,' she said.

He smiled at the formal, everyday, lifeless words.

'You must be cold,' he cried.

He jumped down from the parapet and took a rug from the grass by the river-edge, where they had left their knapsack with lunch remains and their other rods.

At dinner that night nobody but a close observer would have noticed any change in them. Nor did they care to admit even to themselves that in this last passionate blaze the frail tissue that was left of their once tender, intimate love was nearly all burned away.

XVIII

THE second conflagration occurred the following day. They all went for a picnic down by the river (at a spot perhaps a little over a mile from the particular bridge), and after lunch went blackberrying – that is, Janet, Hugh, Hugh's boy, John, and, with her mother, little four year old Daphne. A sort of fate led them once more towards that bridge, – simply, of course, that the blackberries were more profuse down that way. At last they came to a low meadow entirely overgrown with brambles – and here they scattered in their competitive gathering. Then as the sun began to tilt towards the horizon they suddenly noticed that John was not with them.

They called him; and Hugh, agitated, uneasy (did he think, superstitiously, that the boy had followed his mother into the water), ran up the slope and called and called from there. From this elevation above the low meadow he could see the whole country for a good two miles in front of him, but, unless he was hidden by bramble bushes or hedges, the boy was not there. At last they began anxiously to search for him – Janet hampered a little by Daphne, who was very tired. In not much more than an hour it would be dusk and misty, and with every minute alarm hurried their feet the more.

They beat down towards their picnic place first, and Hugh ran ahead to see if the boy had simply gone back to Miss Winthrop without telling them, although as he was at the age which feels most contempt for younger brothers and sisters' governesses, this was not at all likely.

But too soon he came racing back with long face. Heavy at heart, without a word to each other as to why they were

suddenly so grave, Janet and Hugh strode off downstream towards the bridge. And it was there they discovered the boy. He was crouching under the bridge down by the water, crushed against the mossy stone, his head buried in his arms, sobbing bitterly. Janet laid her hand on his shoulder and spoke to him, but he shook her off impatiently. Janet and Hugh looked deep into each other's eyes.

'John!' Hugh said.

'Yes, father,' the boy replied, and raised his red eyes.

'Come, John, it's time to be getting home,' Hugh said, impatiently.

'Very well,' the boy said, dully. He got up and began to walk slowly away.

'You'd better not let Miss Winthrop see you like that, had you, old man,' Hugh asked, still gently, kindly.

The boy fumbled helplessly in his pockets, as if looking for a handkerchief.

Janet was watching him, her own eyes moist.

'Here, John,' she said, very softly, and she took her own handkerchief and put one arm round his shoulder, and made as if to smooth his tousled hair with her fingers.

The result was astounding. The boy flung her arm off. His eyes blazed with sudden hatred. He strode away upstream as fast as he could go, crying out as he went:

'I can do without *your* help!'

The outburst was the more remarkable that hitherto there had never been a sign of the boy's not loving Janet.

It was more than poor Hugh, with his nerves taut enough in any case, in spite of his calm, kind exterior, could stand. In a few strides he was level with the boy. He seized him by the shoulder and wrenched him round.

'What does this mean?' countered his father.

'You know what I mean.'

Silence.

'Answer me!'

'She's not my mother, that's why!'

'How dare you speak like that,' Hugh cried. 'Why did you do what you did?'

The boy looked sullen.

'Speak out!'

'She had no right. . . .'

'You're not to say "she," you're to say "mother," as you always do,' Hugh ordered him.

The boy began now to be a little frightened.

'Come,' Hugh said, 'what's it all about?'

By this time Janet, who had hung aloof, came up with them. Her presence obviously made John feel a little ashamed.

'Mother shouldn't have come just when. . . .' he began.

The defiance simply maddened Hugh.

'How dare you, sir,' he shouted at his son, 'cause us all this worry by going off there and hiding from us? What's it all about? What were you snivelling there for?'

Janet trembled, white as a sheet, seeing these two, father and son, pointlessly lacerating each other's souls; but she was powerless to intervene.

'Because . . . that . . . is. . . .' – the words came brokenly – 'where . . . mother . . . fell . . . in. . . .'

It was the last straw. Hugh's hand came heavy on the little fellow's cheek. The clout sent him staggering.

'How dare you, how dare you behave like this,' was all the tortured man could cry in his rage, 'how dare you go snivelling there. Go home and get to bed.'

And he clouted the boy twice again to hurry him on his way.

'Come,' he said shortly to Janet, and, miserable both of them, each in a different way, they followed the miserable,

broken-hearted schoolboy, weeping now, sobbing because the reaction had come to bring hopeless lassitude to his small frame. Little John Garner realized only too fully how he had hurt his stepmother, whom he really loved dearly, and how irrevocable that hurt was.

It was only when the boy was in bed and they were downstairs in the cottage they had taken for his autumn holiday at Thornton that they spoke of what had happened that afternoon.

XIX

JANET turned to Hugh. He was sitting in an armchair, reading the batch of dailies which never reached Thorton before they set out in the morning on their little expeditions. She was standing, restless, in front of the sticky, sluggish, coal fire.

'How could you?' she demanded, 'how could you? How could you be so harsh with John?'

He lowered his *Telegraph* a trifle, to answer her.

'I don't quite understand,' he said.

'Hugh, dear, you know very well what I mean.'

She was firm, determined. But then they both of them no doubt knew they were out for battle; that something had at last happened that made it absolutely essential to have the matter out fully, once and for all time.

'Thank God,' Janet secretly offered her thanks. 'Thank God something has happened to end his horrible silence.'

She did not yet realize it ended more than that.

'If you mean my punishing him for being so rude to you all I can say is that I think I was very moderate indeed. The little scoundrel. Who, I wonder, can have been putting such ideas into his head?'

'But you can't call him a little scoundrel, Hugh, can you, for crying over his dead mother? For that was what you punished him for, in the end, wasn't it?'

'He has no dead mother,' Hugh said, dully and in a painfully dry voice.

'But. . . .'

'You have been a mother to him, you have been everything to him since he was nine. . . .'

'But still. Remember he was seven years old when he lost his mother. . . . He must remember her.'

She was striving to speak out, and yet still to avoid wounding him unnecessarily.

'Why must you insist on harping on the dead?' he asked her.

God knows he did not want to be coarse, but the words would not come any gentler.

'Hugh, boy,' Janet asked, trying again to come nearer to him, trying to break down the barrier between them. 'Why must you always be so harsh about the past? Yes, harsh, I mean. Inhuman.'

He simply stared at her, stonily, over the edge of his *Telegraph*. He still had not put down his newspaper, consented to regard the conversation as important.

'Don't you see that it comes between us? Don't you see that by that you make yourself a stranger to me, of all people?'

Again a sneer curved his firm, bloodless lips.

'I see only that this entirely unnecessary sentiment stands between us,' he said.

Perhaps at this point he would have liked to be smooth and calm, would have given all he had to be so; but he had been silent too long. To her her all was impossible, yet, with that burden of silence he had it was equally impossible to be reminded by her and by his son of the past. Only by ignoring that past could he be strong. But he still thought their mutual love was powerful enough to annihilate any barrier between them.

'Cannot you understand, dearest woman,' he asked, painfully trying to make his hard voice soft, 'that I cannot bear to have my love, our love, crossed by any unnecessary shadow?'

Tears started into her eyes. She made every effort to stop them, but for all her efforts they would fill swimming full; tears because her woman's heart could never be so single-purposed as his, a man's heart. When she was able to control herself she said:

'But cannot you understand, Hugh, that for me, if you love me, the shadow of John's mother, the shadow of a woman you once loved, is not a shadow? Cannot you understand, too, oh, can't you see that this hard, stony harsh part of you, this great sealed part of your heart, is the real shadow for me?'

He looked at her, and felt the gulf between them. But yet he knew only too well the integrity of his love for her, and in his inner ear rasped his stubborn male reason:

'Since you love her so, if you can but make her know it she cannot but see that you are right!'

He did not know that, in his terrible inner struggle throughout these years, he had purified his own heart till it had ceased to be that many-emotioned, self-contradictory human heart which is the only kind most people seem to understand. He made a supreme effort to master his irritation and his agony, and to tell her clearly of his love.

'But, Janet,' he said, 'if you know how I love you, and would die for you; if you know I give you all my love. . . .'

He could not comprehend that she should not want all his love, but only all that human part remaining that it was her right to have.

'Hugh dear,' she said, and went up to him, and knelt down, and tenderly laid her hand on his.

The newspaper had dropped to the floor. His bony, firm, hairy hands lay brown and helpless on his knees. They started involuntarily at the touch of hers.

He looked at her. Her face was eloquent with its love and its sacrifice and its suffering; but it pleaded with him, and pleading he did not want, pleading would not suffer. He wanted, wanted that hard, clear, laughing love and companionship, such as lightly, freely, crystal clear, she had offered him, now so long ago it seemed, in Vienna. How gloriously hard her heart had seemed then! How womanly, how full of

strange conflicting things it seemed now! The blood beat fast and heavy in his temples. How far away she seemed!

It incensed him. He was filled with grief and sorrow before the ruins of something that might have been like . . . like a bare Greek temple on the bare Greek hills. It was, instead, complex, curious, alien and Gothic, a thing of half-shades under a shifting English sky. He made still another, the last effort, but even as he made it he knew he marked the end of their intimacy.

'Janet,' he said, 'I offer you my love in all honesty as I did in those days in Vienna. No, I offer it you more honestly than ever then, because now I know more clearly what I feel and what I have to give. More I cannot do. You give me what you can in return.'

She looked at him with eyes full of trouble.

'Only do not ask me, please do not ask me, to spoil the purity of my love!'

But she did not understand his words. She only saw that he was what she had long feared he was, alien to her; something, for all she still believed he loved her, that she could not understand.

If she had bothered to make an image for herself, it would have been the desert. It would have been all the same to her whether it were a cold desert of the north, swept by a barren, icy wind; or a desert like the splendid cruel wastes of Persia that have their seasons when they break into lavish ephemeral flower, so that their harshness is not for ever barren, but is rather a divine and austere interlude between one spring and the next. She would not have understood the essential difference.

She cared naught, then or after, for images. She cared for her husband, and for the lover she had lost; and for his child and for their children, into whom, as far as she could, she endeavoured to instil that human tenderness which, from that fateful day, she saw was entirely lacking in him.

XX

TWELVE long years had passed. Hugh Garner was well on the road to sixty. Janet was in her forties; with her constant and quiet care of herself she was bearing age well. Young John Garner, twenty-six, was in sight of starting to practise as a doctor; the two other children were both at school. By simple reason of his steadfast purpose, which had quickly become the very basis of his life, Hugh Garner's affairs had prospered on all sides. He was not what is nowadays called a rich man; but he was definitely well off, with an income that tended to augment at a steady and constant rate. The Garner household did not differ much from many another household of its financial level throughout the length and breadth of England. The mother was perhaps a little more absorbed in her children, her house, her self for herself's sake than is usual; the father perhaps at first observation a little more austere and withdrawing. It needed closer acquaintance to glimpse the tragic tenseness that was hidden by that calm, dignified exterior.

The first impression of it one got was that Hugh Garner had borne the years so well because he had determined to. You could, when he was putting his shoulder to the wheel, so to speak, superintending work on the estate, toiling side by side with his men, see, if he did not know he was being observed, his eyebrows pursed with a stubborn sort of purpose. It was as if he had to force his body to do its work because it was growing a little tired of the effort, but he was not going to let it relax. It was only later, when you realized how healthy he was physically, and when you caught the same tense look under circumstances quite different that you might realize that the purpose related to something else quite different from the conquest of old age.

He had the same perfectly mechanical look of effort in his eyes when he spoke to his wife about any matters which were not strictly business. Even with his closest friend, Jenkinson, whose old age (already long arrived), was preoccupied with testing all the gimcrack forms of abdominal exercises and iodine to be taken internally against it, there was of late a tendency to the same effort, which he was at no great pains to conceal.

He knew himself it was there. It had been there long enough for him to know it well; ever since the day when his boy John had so enraged him; for on that day he had resigned himself to his lonely life. For the look of effort in his eyes was the result of the effort he had to make to reach that surface contact, that as a human being he was obliged to make with others really alien to him. For he was spiritually a lonely man.

He discoursed quietly with Janet, his admirable wife, on politics, on gardening, on their children's schools and future; He was no more taciturn, in fact, than any other Englishman of his kind; but spiritually he was alone. Only to Jenkinson had he half-opened his heart soon after he had for ever relinquished the effort he had made so valiantly, the effort to achieve his quixotic ideal of unity with a being so different – with a woman. And now the time had come when Jenkinson, who had seemed at least to understand the situation, had begun – was it because in his own lonely old age he had long ceased, woman-chaser as he was, to function in any way – the time had come when Jenkinson had begun to gibe at him, to suggest that he was at fault for any ruin that had come into his life.

. . . . . .

With all his heart he pitied Jenkinson. The old man's very reason for living – his sexual powers, – had left him,

now some time ago; and nothing else seemed left to him. Instead of satisfaction that the rout had lasted so long he seemed to feel nothing but a blank despair as, his gaunt frame bent forward in an eternal stoop, he blindly conned the empty air before him for the final death that was not far off.

But did Jenkinson really think that he himself was in so much better a state? Jenkinson was lonely, yes, with no living barrier against death. But were wife and children much more a barrier for him? It was on that now that Hugh Garner brooded with his sombre mind, practised in brooding by all these twenty years of labour and inward struggle. Did the children he had (as Jenkinson suggested), really help him over the last few laps to the grave?

How little others ever know of our real feelings, our real thoughts. Between himself and John, between himself and the two younger children, but especially, by strange irony, between himself and John, the one that was not hers, Janet was a constant obstacle. For the children – he had to confess it – had grown up alien to him. And of late his isolation had increased, for he had learned to admit that men too can have that diffuse way of perceiving things which, during his years of struggle to accomplish his ideal with Janet, he had believed was the peculiarity of women only. Even Jenkinson, now that he was near the grave, grim contrast with what Garner was, morbid, maudlin, – even Jenkinson he found lacked that harsh courage before life, and before the price we pay for our pleasure in it, that his own unpremeditated far-away crime had forced him to acquire and to admire. Holding his life in his own hands had taught him to value life, taught him to escape inward perdition, taught him to aspire high towards a pure love and ideal which few conceive and fewer attain; taught him how to stride on, without ever flinching, from

lonely life into his lonely death. Death is not terrible; it is untimely death that is terrible.

. . . . . .

'Life is a much more complex affair than you seem to find it, Father,' was what his son John said to him on the one occasion, at about this time, when he got down to bed-rock with him. He saw that his son thought he saw in him an amusing survival of a puerile positivist philosophy. And his somewhat scornful attempts to explain to his son, who had never known real suffering, and never been taught, as he had, to face harsh death amid peaceful life (but who had, in the pampered way of England, with comforts and peace all round him, been encouraged to grow up with a veil before all those things), all failed, all failed.

This now fully-grown man, on the verge of setting up practice as a doctor of medicine, could not grasp his father's thought, could see no reason for being guided, as Hugh Garner was, neither by that Christian religion of the Established Church that decent folk sheeplike follow, nor by that philosophy which inquiring spirits take for their guide – but by harsh recognition, at every turn, that death is at hand, and that even if it does not come to-morrow your experience while you wait longer for it will avail you nothing. For nothing, as Hugh Garner saw, is ever repeated, nothing is ever retrieved; what you have once done is beyond your reach for ever, and you may never do it again, may never put it right.

XXI

On his seventieth birthday Hugh Garner took stock of his position. With some amazement, and with deep gratitude to his life that had, in spite of disaster, given him the opportunity to achieve the power for such knowledge and self-command, he observed that the constraint which had held him so many years, because of the secret burden he had borne, had entirely left him, he knew not when. He was set free, unexpectedly free at last, by his own spiritual freedom.

He thought it over from every weak side of it. Yet it did not seem likely that his inward calm was caused by the beginning of the end, caused, that is, by decay setting in in his brain, caused by second childhood. His doctor pronounced him sound; his blood pressure, for his age and his heavy build, was reasonably low. Spectacles he needed, but with a quite low power he read with ease. He had even devoted himself of late to scientific reading. The mathematics of it all was too much for him – but then he had never, he reflected, had a head for mathematics. But one day when he discussed new chemical processes with his doctor son, that young man (married himself now) who had felt for years he had to condescend to his old father, was astounded at the vigour of the old man's mind and the exactness of his information.

No, the inward calm could only mean that after his long years of exile – his long years of hardening and closing his heart – he had achieved what he had only half-consciously been seeking since he once gave up the struggle for unity with his wife. He had achieved such detachment that he could give what was in him to give without the entanglement

of needing to receive in return, without the entanglement of exchange.

Nearly all giving in life goes only when there is a taking. Only thus can the balance of any intercourse be maintained, for intercourse connotes exchange. The touch of heart on heart is inevitably a spiritual commerce, a barter of which the great peculiarity is that it is accomplished automatically. Ordinarily we only give of ourselves to those with whom we are bound in contact by that seeming unity, that half-unity, that striving for unity, we call friendship and love. And Hugh Garner's position was that by his exiled life he had reached that state of release in which he asked nothing, and reached it not so much by old age as by a long struggle of which old age was no more than a sort of by-product. At least, conscious he was free of all bonds, he felt he was free to give in a real giving, nor, in this freedom of spirit, did the giving cost anything, so that he should even in that way be obliged to seek in return.

. . . . . .

A new period, the last period, began in the Garner household. It began unnoticeably, so that none could say when the change had taken place. There was no conscious point when daughter or either son (the younger was now twenty-six) who had all feared their father for his austerity or despised him for his narrow, cramped mind, remarked to their mother, 'How kind Father has become!' or 'What a dear Father is!' or 'How clever Father is!' They came all of them to regard him as clever, kind, and a dear without having noticed the change.

His emergence was so unassertive that none of them was aware of when it happened. And, later, if any had remarked on old Hugh Garner's qualities, they would all of them have been prepared to say he had always been like that, and to have accused themselves, inwardly, of having been too young,

too egoistic, too selfish, too blind to have noticed it. All in turn discussed their intimate affairs with him; and his advice was always ready for them. They scarcely noticed how firm, clear, uncompromising that advice always was. At that late hour, when he had renounced all contact, he began to achieve contact. Having at last almost forgotten he had ever desired unity, he began to achieve unity, and his children, who had been alien, became partly him.

. . . . . .

It was not till he was twenty-nine that Christopher Garner contemplated marriage. It was characteristic now of the Garner household that one of his first thoughts was to ask his father's advice. Christopher had taken the estate over. He had no call to a profession as John had had. He was rather a sombre youth, dark – a little of his mother's features – solemn, with a sound head for business. He was doing his job well. He came down from town one week-end, and on Saturday, at lunch, he said to his father:

'Father, could you spare me half an hour or so this afternoon, or would to-morrow suit you better? I want to ask your advice about a little matter.'

'Business?' Hugh asked, and he shook his head, 'you should not ask old bones about business.'

'No,' Christopher said, 'my own stupid affairs.'

After lunch they settled themselves into the depths of deeply sprung chairs.

'Now what is it?' Hugh asked.

His son went straight to the point.

'I'm thinking of getting married,' he said, 'and I would like to ask your opinion, Father, about marriage.'

Hugh had not expected this. The words struck at his heart, but he did not show it.

'I've no doubt, boy,' he said, 'that you've thought over all

the pros and cons and made a good choice. I can trust you to do that. Get on with it, and good luck.'

'You believe in marriage, then, Father?'

Hugh laughed gently.

'What tactless questions the present generation does ask,' he said.

Then, in answer to the slight shade that crossed his son's face, he hurried to add:

'But I will answer you, boy; I'll tell you anything I have to tell, if it's any use to you you shall hear it.'

Christopher was blunt and honest. He went straight to the point.

'Perhaps if I ask exactly what I want to know, Father, it will be fairer of me,' he said. 'You have been married twice. Can a man love twice? Can. . . ?'

How like Christopher this was, to go straight to the point.

'I think I know what you mean,' Hugh interrupted him, 'you mean does not one loyalty interfere with another?'

Christopher nodded.

'That's about what I mean,' he said. 'You see, we all know, and I suppose you know we do, about your forbidding John to mention his own mother.'

He paused and stammered, horribly conscious suddenly on what painful ground he might be.

Hugh smiled at him. He was glorying in the freedom that thus enabled him to smile.

'Go on,' he said, 'say all you have to.'

'Why did you do that? Was there any. . . ?'

'No, Christopher. Against John's mother no word can be said. But this is the reason – that when I married again, when I married your mother, I vowed nothing on earth, nothing on earth, not even memories, should mar the perfection of our unity.'

The boy nodded. It occurred neither to him nor to his father that the words ignored any continuance of individual life after death, or at least denied any significance of such an after life.

'And all I have to say to you when you marry is: be clear in yourself what unity you wish to achieve. Be clear to yourself and vow to keep it, and set aside any obstacle that may be in the path.'

The boy nodded.

'But above all, I think, be prepared to conquer any failure to achieve your ideal. Remember above all, that no two people are ever as alike as at moments they may seem to be. In any case, if there is any rule in life in the end other than your own integrity I am ignorant of it.'

. . . . . .

The following year, when Hugh Garner was just turned seventy-five, and his wife was fifty-nine, sudden illness removed her. There was an enormous attendance at the funeral in Little Blaydon Church. Hugh Garner and his wife – especially his wife, in fact – were popular figures in Rickton, which had now grown, and Blaydon to meet it, so that they made practically one large, part-industrial, part-residential town. There were present at the funeral some who had followed the first Mrs Garner to the grave. They remembered that now, and it was food to them, for they were all old folk living on memories.

'How different from when they buried his first poor dear wife,' the old women said. 'He couldn't attend because he was still laid-up from the accident, but had he been able to be about, it's doubtful how he'd have stood it. So stricken with grief he was that for months he saw no one. And look at him now! '

The old man, visibly bearing the signs of his years, but

yet still hale, still well-fleshed, looking, in fact, nearer sixty than seventy-five, walked firmly at the head of the mourners. There was no trace of hesitation in his tread.

'All his love was in the other,' the old women gossiped.

Little they knew how trifling their cheap ready-made view of the passions and ideals of love was.

. . . . . .

And then, two years later, at the good age of seventy-seven, Hugh Garner followed his second wife. He was buried a member of the church into which he had been born. Thus it stood in his will, for to the things of religion he had never given much thought, but had taken the outward forms unquestioningly as they came. Though he was not religious the Old Testament tradition of the English Church was dear to him.

On his gravestone, a square-cut plain block of marble, according to a special addition to his will they carved nothing but his name, his dates, and two phrases from the Bible. 'There is a time to die. . . .'

And

'A man void of understanding striketh hands. . . .'

THE BANDIT

FOREWORD TO THE BANDIT

THE BANDIT is not in any sense to be taken as a picture of life in any Balkan State. It is a tale about a man, and not a description of a certain aspect of life in another country.

None of the personal names, (which are definitely Serbian simply because I felt they had to be definitely something), bear any personal reference whatsoever; and that of Artanovitch even is a pure invention. The place names are all invented, and the country and all the other physical things described are purely imaginary, by which I mean that you will find them nowhere.

The only foreign words which I have used and which may be strange are four:

(1) *Rakia* RAKHJA, in which some will recognize *arrack*. *Rakia* is the Serbian form of Turkish رقی, and denotes a spirit distilled from a fruit, commonly the ordinary black plum; (2) *yatak*, JATAK which is the Serbian for a bandit's agent in a village – for the man in whose house he can take refuge or dump his swag. The word is the Turkish یاتق, denoting a bed or camping place, which sense it has preserved in Modern Greek γιατάκι which denotes a bed ; (3) *Kafana*; a *kafana* (coffee-house) roughly corresponds to an inn; the *kafana* in a village forms a centre of village life; (4) *Giezva*; Turkish جزوه; a small brass vessel, tinned inside, sloping from a narrow opening at the top to a wide base, with a straight ornamented handle projecting from the top, used for brewing coffee in.

Both *rakia* and *yatak* exist in other Balkan languages. I

have used the Serbian form because one form or other had to be used, and once I was using Serbian personal names it seemed more fitting to use the Serbian form of these words.

Belgrade, 1929

THE BANDIT

I

NICHOLAS ARTANOVITCH was thirty-two that day when he tricked the patrols out for him, by taking the high road from Belodor (where he had lain three days) to Sintzi in broad daylight. He measured five feet eleven and looked a well-made six as he stood in his peasant sandals. He was dressed in brown homespun breeches and jacket, like any other villager for three counties around; on his head he wore a black lambskin cap. He carried no arms that one could see. The night before, when the alarm came, he had wrapped his favourite rifle in sacks and buried it in the field at the back of his Belodor refuge there. Yet whenever the road passed between high banks, or anyone appeared in sight, on foot, on horse, on wheels, behind him or in front, though he walked as carelessly as before, with the loose stride of the peasant, you could have noticed that it was his left hand carried his stick; his right was ready at his hip. Six little cones of lead were there, ready for any fool that accosted him with too quick a look in his eye.

It was nine o'clock. The May sun was already hot in the sky, and with every minute, crushing, it seemed visibly to turn the foliage of the trees to a darker hue of green. For a mile the road had been rising steadily, bearing up a wooded ridge. Now it swept round a bend, and below him suddenly lay revealed the ragged cluster of white-walled houses of Sintzi.

Nothing but a leisurely dusty murmur came from below. The wild village dogs, weary from the night's howling, were silent. The hollow sound of men and women in the fields calling to each other, the flat tinkle of bells on the sheep, were

absorbed by the golden air. To Artanovitch, who had emerged that morning after days of hiding by day and stealthy moving by night, the warm confusion was pleasing and soporific.

Up the gentle slope from the village (about a mile and a half in front of him), a string of ox-waggons of hay were lurching and grinding. He had passed at last the hilltop woods, where he had feared ambush, and before him, if he had to push on farther lay open country for a good twenty miles, with rare and sparse copses.

There was a house away on the far edge of the village, of old a bandit's refuge, where he reckoned he would be safely able to lie low a few days. On his head was the equivalent of one hundred pounds, dead or alive, and in the fields before him there was not a peasant whom alone mortal fear would keep from trying to get him, to earn that greedy sum. He carried his life in his skill with a gun, and what trust he could have in such men as the owner of the house that was his aim.

He moved to the right off the road, and followed a foot-path that skirted the wood. The men coming up the hill with their waggons were still not even within hailing distance. He followed the path on the curve of the woods that ran along the ridge for miles until a curve in it hid him from sight of the road. When he was sure he was out of sight of the road he turned his head, quickly, to make sure he was not followed; then plunged sharply among the sheltering trees. His holster strap was unfastened, his hand on his revolver, his finger ready crooked on the trigger; and he went steadily forward, keeping about fifty yards from the edge of the woods, for a good half hour – till he reckoned to have passed beyond the lay of the village. He then crept towards the open hill.

Within ten feet of the outer air he lay down under a close

thorn thicket, behind a beech tree trunk, and turned his head this way and that, partly to see if there were any people working in the fields near him, – but much more in order to hear. Long practice had made every safeguarding trick familiar to him. He was like an undomesticated animal in the natural grace of his caution.

Behind him in the wood the wind rustled softly. The air was damp and cool, but the wind was changing, and into the wood fitful yet gentle gusts, hot and dry, came every now and then from the outer air. It was now but two hours to midday, and the sun (that Artanovitch, moving by night, had seen for many days but at sunset and sunrise), was already fierce. His eyes smarted a little and watered.

Immediately before him the hillside, divided into fields by narrow gaps in the crops, was covered with young maize. It was nearly a yard high, an early and a good year. The broad green leaves stirred evenly in the wind. The ranks of the maize reached as far as he could see on either side, and down the slope for over half a mile. Beyond it lay fields of beet, spring wheat and rye.

The village was cupped in the hollow, to the left.

The house he trusted that was to be his refuge lay surrounded with cherry and plum trees, nearly half a mile out of the village proper, on the away from him side. But as he had gone nearly a mile along the hill crest it was now to all intents immediately in front of him. Between him and the house lay nothing but the pastures in the hollow and the other road (from Sintzi out to Blasco).

But from where he now lay he could see this road, about thirty yards of it visible, while among the green, and his heart sank. Now he understood the meaning of the distant rattle that had begun to strike his ear. Carelessly he had forgotten it was Thursday, and the market in Blasco; and as he watched

the thirty yards of white road little black blots moved, every moment more frequent, along it, towards Sintzi; and there floated up to him every now and then in the marooned air the lazy reverberations of a tipsy shout. It was the folk – Sintzi folk and folk of a dozen villages that lay beyond, Little Sintzi, Satchitza, Senko and the rest – homeward-bound from the market town. He had to cross that string of people (all of whom knew him by repute, all of whom would have seen or heard of the one hundred pounds reward offered at the Blasco Prefecture, with his picture), and there was a constant line of them now, not only in carts, but, many of them, walking, long straggling groups. And yet he dared not wait for night-fall – he had lost enough time already – for the patrols were out behind him, driving him – he knew that was their object as well as he knew they were after him – into that open, coverless country – but any one of those ahead, primed with drink, if they could not capture him themselves, would be only too quick to try for official favour and a petty reward by giving the alarm.

But then, as he thought over all the dangers, lying there in the shade of the bush on the damp ground, and realized by the sun that it was well after ten, and that any moment he might see grey uniforms and ready rifles closing in on him, he heard the sharp sound of horse's hoofs; immediately behind him, rapidly approaching, crashing the undergrowth. Desperately he turned his head the way from which the sound came, and quickly huddled right under the thorns, and pulled two clips of cartridges out of his belt, and laid before him. He balanced his revolver in his hand and lay still and ready. The crashing came nearer and nearer ; he saw there was a track through the woods a little farther ahead of where he had stopped; and then, in a moment, into this clearing rode, not a gendarme in pursuit of him, but Marko Lentchitch, the rich-

est and most powerful man in Sintzi. A way out of his difficulty flashed through Artanovitch's brain.

As fast as his stiffened legs would let him he was on his feet and across Marko's road, a revolver levelled at Marko's bulky body.

'Hands up!' he cried, 'hands up!'

The effect of his words on Marko Lentchitch's face was remarkable. Marko Lentchitch was never a coward, but at the sight of Bloody Nicholas Artanovitch, ready there with his revolver and desperation in his eyes, he turned a trifle paler and his eyes rolled uneasily.

Slowly his hands left the reins and rose into the air.

'Good day to you,' he said. He spoke a little reproachfully. 'And what brings you this way?'

The question sounded weak, but, perhaps instinctively, Marko tried to give the impression he had no idea of the last two months' doings; for when the season ended last autumn Nicholas had been a whole county away, and his exploits, far from alarming the folk round Blasco, had excited a sort of pride in them. When none of the government people were about there had been a deal of self-satisfied talk of 'our Nick' in the village inns on long evenings, for Artanovitch was from those parts.

'That's none of yours,' Nicholas answered, curtly. 'I'm agoin' through, if you want t'know, and I want that horse of yours. Off y' tumble!'

Marko eyed the revolver carefully. He gave a swift look ahead at the few yards that separated him from the open country. No doubt he cursed his hesitation that had made him pull up instead of risking a bullet and spurring his mare through the last few yards of undergrowth and away over the green fields.

'Well. . . .' he began to temporize.

'No bloody foolery,' Nicholas snapped at him, 'you know well enough I don't waste my time jabbering. Off that horse.'

Then 'Stop that!' he roared, as one of Marko's hands seemed to be aiming at a saddle holster. He went up to him and wrenched the revolver from its case.

'Put your hands where I can see'm,' he ordered, 'and look slippy.'

Then Marko gave in. Obediently he put his hands on Nicholas's side of the saddle and tumbled off his horse. That patient black hole of Artanovitch's revolver nozzle made him feel creepy down his spine, and he did not waste time an instant in turning to Nicholas – who in a very short time had him strapped firmly enough to the beech tree to prevent his getting free for a very good while.

Artanovitch imagined he could now hear the gendarme's horse's hoofs from afar. There was not a moment to lose.

He snatched off Marko's big shaggy fur cap and the brightly-coloured peasant bag he wore over his shoulder, and sprang onto Marko's horse and cantered away, straight from the path through the woods, straight along the track Marko evidently would have taken, and as he went, with cunning deliberation he spat on his fingers and curled his own rather long, sweeping moustaches into the fierce, short corkscrews that Marko Lentchitch wore.

He rode straight at the village. But when he was within a couple of hundred yards of the first houses he reined in, – remained still as if thinking for a minute, undecided, – and then pulled the great mare round and cantered off sharp to the right, gradually converging on to the Blasco road. He rode parallel with the road, a good hundred yards from it, till he saw that for some distance ahead it was clear, and then

swung sharply, at the gallop, across the clear patch of road and up the gentle slope into the country beyond.

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Beyond Sintzi the land lay in undulating hills; where they were bare, the soil, pale sandy clay, glinted a little ruddy in the sunlight. Artanovitch left Sintzi on the left. The house which was his objective was level with him.

His plan had already matured in his practised brain. In a few minutes he was silhouetted against the burning sun on the crest of the gentle rise, crossing a field of spring barley, the horse he rode buoyed up on a cloud of gilded dust. Then to any curious eyes back in Sintzi or on the high road that might be wondering whither could Marko Lentchitch be bound, only his body remained in view, his shoulders, his head, his shaggy fur cap (Marko's fur cap), then nothing at all. He was lost to sight for the village below, over the first ridge beyond the village.

He spurred on to a tiny copse not far ahead. By good fortune the country round seemed deserted. It was the hour of the mid-day meal, and there was no one working; no one thinking of aught, in the summer heat, but food or sleep. Once at the copse, concealed among its trees, he reined in and dismounted, dashed to a thorn bush, tore off a dozen angry spikes (an inch or more long, and nearly as hard as iron), led Marko's horse carefully through to the farther edge of the copse, and then stuck the three strongest and sharpest thorns through the sacking under the saddle, so that the weight of the saddle made them prick the animal's back. The mare, aggravated by the strange hand, now became savagely restive, and yet every time she bucked the sharp thorns annoyed her more. Artanovitch kept fast hold of her for a couple of minutes, till she was thoroughly worked up, and then he released her, and slashed at her haunches with a hawthorn

branch. She uttered one startled, wild whinny and dashed forward. Her canter bounced the saddle up and down on her back, the automatic goad grew intolerable, her canter after a few steps became a gallop, back lay her ears, and she was soon out of sight down the next slope.

Artanovitch examined the hoofmarks, quickly scattered a few dry leaves over the obvious marks of his own feet, and, treading stealthily, stepped away. Nothing but the most careful examination could show but that he had paused to breathe his horse, and then had spurred straight on again.

Once again he found a thicket under which he could lie and keep a fair look out. He was within thirty yards of his own tracks through the copse. Everything depended on the horse's going far enough, riderless, before it began its inevitable circling towards home, and showed his pursuers that he was afoot again. His eyes were bright. The risk stirred his blood.

Many minutes had passed before he heard the sound of clattering hoofs on the road in the village, now in unison, now scattering in a loose chain of sound, and he understood how close behind him they had been. And soon a number of horsemen, the patrol, came into sight, riding out along the Blasco road – the village had given the news – yes, and Marko Lentchitch himself, a revolver flourishing in his hand, now rode with them – out along the Blasco road. They rode, seven all told, spread out over a wide front, some on the road, some on each side, to pick up his traces; then he saw them rein in, waving and signalling to each other, and, a minute later, a compact little body, breast the slope, galloping hard straight for the copse; following the clear hoof tracks in the soft soil of the field.

But the moment they saw that the tracks led into the copse

they reined in, cautious. They knew their man, and, in case he was concealed in that copse, ready for pure bravado to shoot one or two of them down before breaking away in flight, they circled the copse, giving it a good berth. Their caution saved Artanovitch, lying beneath his thicket, and he breathed freely as he heard two of them cry in one breath 'He's away, he's away.' Without even troubling to pass through the copse or examine the hoofmarks at the edge of it they concluded the natural thing when they saw the hoofmarks on the far side – that the fugitive had galloped on – and they wasted no time pushing through the dense brushwood, but all of them circled the trees, and in a few minutes they were over the ridge where the track led them.

That evening, after dusk, Artanovitch made his way cautiously to the farmhouse where he hoped for help.

II

He lay in the orchard. The white walls of the house glowed softly in the May night, a little below him, about thirty yards away. He was at the edge of the orchard. There was a rough fence separating it from the spacious yard. The single-floored house had a wide verandah, the overhanging roof supported on whitewashed timbers. There was a block of stables and sheds at right-angles to it and this enclosed the yard to Artanovitch's right hand. The other side of the yard was unprotected but for untidy acacias, beyond which the ground sloped down to some willows and a shallow stream, which served for watering the cattle and for drainage. Timbers stretching diagonally from verandah to stables across the angle formed a framework for climbing vines, and under the green canopy starred with leafy gaps revealing the inky blue sky which these provided, three people were sitting on a rough bench discussing the doings of that day with a fourth, who stood before them.

These were the old mother, whose cavernous croak was rarely to be heard; Zhivko Trifounatz, her son, the master of the house, a sturdy, well-dressed peasant of about forty-two, with full face, shifty black eyes, and a coal-black moustache cut to a sausage shape; his daughter, Militza, with the father's full face and beady eyes, but a somewhat full-lipped mouth (this she had from her dead mother), a strapping girl, well-dressed too, with an undergown white under her zouave and neatly tied kerchief and new sandals, of about twenty years, and unmarried; while before them stood their neighbour, one Radovan Miloutinovitch, who professed to be the village expert on horseflesh and was brother to the headman of the village, the mayor.

Artanovitch had to wait his chance to appear. He lay dead still. He had to wait till the Miloutinovitch fellow had gone. In the stillness of the village night he could distinguish nearly every word that was said.

But he had not long to wait.

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'We'll get him 'fore long,' said Radovan. 'He came pretty near singeing his whiskers to-day; but the patrol and Marko Lentchitch are hot after him, though there's no news of them back yet.'

'It's long enough since there was a man of his doings in these parts. Why couldn't he stay over yonder?' Zhivko said.

'Too hot for him,' said Radovan. 'The whole countryside's had enough of him. Loves the sight of blood, you'd think.'

'What's that?' cried Zhivko suddenly, and started up. It was a clatter of hoofs from below the house, in the village street. 'They're back.'

'Let's be there, maybe they've got him,' – and before he finished speaking Radovan Miloutinovitch was already halfway to the gate. Artanovitch watched Zhivko go after him.

The two women, grandmother and grandchild, were left on the bench.

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Perilous as his position was – because any loose dog moving about might reveal him there in the orchard, and the village would be full of gendarmes with their blood up – Artanovitch could not yet decide to reveal himself. It was more than three years since he had last been in this house, and although nevertheless, the time was short, it was as honoured guest he had been there, before he had begun his bandit's career, begun to live. Much might well have changed in the meantime without his knowing of it. But in Belodor, before he had

left, they had assured him he had a safe home at Zhivko's, and sent a messenger two days ahead to warn Zhivko that he might appear. Had Zhivko told his womenfolk ? He listened carefully to all they said.

The two women were silent for some minutes. Then the old one spoke.

He could scarce catch her broken sentences, but he heard her saying, 'Heaven,' and 'Judgement,' and 'Maker,' and then came his own name and then 'none so black,' and then 'salvation'; and he saw not only that since he had seen her she had gone religious, so that he had nothing to fear from her, but that even though she must know he might arrive any minute Militza knew nothing at all of it.

It was naturally she that interested him the more.

'Come, Nanny,' he heard her say, in her clear, emotionless virginal voice, 'all men cannot be alike. Think of Radovan, and then of Artanovitch; how Artanovitch must have changed – Radovan could never be so cruel. Ugh!'

She shuddered, voluntarily, demonstratively.

'I should die if I saw him, Nanny,' she said.

Artanovitch's lips twisted. Hard experience taught him that such great claps of emotion as that fear Militza declared he would inspire are very rare things indeed, and for all we hear of them are not often to be met with. When he had slept in that house three years before she had certainly not shown any great awe of him. And even if he had put bullets through three men and had stove in the head of a fourth with the knob-side of an axe since then, and set fire to stackyards, and robbed right and left, he could not believe his outward appearance was so very different.

At thirty-two Artanovitch was a fine materialist; the positivist smattering that school and one year of national university had given him had now brought a harvest of small hard fruit

in his shallow brain, and the contours of the world were for him as dry and definite and satisfying as his own bare native hills on a cloudless early September day.

'An' had he not gone this wild way no finer man could be found,' the old woman said.

'Drop it, Nanny,' Militza cried, impatiently, 'as if there were nothing you could think of to say to me, naught but of marriage.'

''Tis all there is, lassie, for a girl going twenty-one. The Miloutinovitches are not to be despised. There's rare a girl that would want a better lot than the first family for miles round.'

'But Radovan is a coward, all the same.'

'Speak no evil, hear no. . . .'

'Drop it, Nanny. Why didn't he go off with the patrol after that beast?'

'What beast, child? How can we know the truth of it all? How do you know Nicholas Artanovitch is a beast?'

'You mean to say, then, he hasn't done all people say?' Militza asked indignantly.

'How can we know any man's heart. Live and let live. We are not the judge of it all. . . .'

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Militza watched the old woman beside her. The shrivelled frame on the bench was like a shadow beneath the clustered vine-leaves. Her face, the skin thickened and coarsened by fifty-eight years of exposure to biting wind in winter and burning heat in summer, fell into angular folds, divided by furrowed wrinkles, out of which thrust the firm cartilage of her eagle nose: and, with a fierceness that was extraordinary under their filmy surface, shone her beady eyes. She sat there huddled, her hands folded, a gnarled knot of wood on her heavy handwove apron, her head tilted a little back, and

those opalescent eyes fixed somewhere, far among the vine-leaves, in the space above.

They sat in silence. All that there was to be said between the old woman and the young girl in the humdrum round of life had already been said plenty of times before; had been said that moment, and would, Militza thought with resignation, be said again to-morrow and the next day and the next, until at last, driven to the submission of marriage, she left her father's house. The death of her mother (just about the time Artanovitch had stayed there when he had come buying up maize three years before), had stemmed the natural course of her life. Her close contact with the old grandmother, which if the old grandmother's will could be done, would have swiftly led the way her grandmother believed meet for all women, to the marriage bed, had turned her in on herself.

Radovan? Yes, Radovan! A very fine match; brother to the head man, acres and acres of arable and herds of cattle and a couple of famous blood stallions, and a handsome set-up man too into the bargain; and she would be in a good position too, because she would not come empty-handed to the altar, there would be no taking on sufferance for her. She was rich enough (with a hundred and sixty acres of arable apart from money in the Blasco Farmers' Credit Bank), to dictate her own terms. Radovan, yes, Radovan; and half a dozen others besides, all nearly as fine matches as Radovan.

Even Georgievitch, who had the big iron stores in Blasco, wanted her for his son. But she would not have him. Her father did not in any way insist; he was not the old-fashion patriarchal father. All he had to say about it was that Radovan was the man for her; but he showed no sign whatever of insisting.

Till her mother's death she had been very free in the usual rustic kissing and cuddling and even more than that, though

her natural peasant caution always kept her from the imprudence of the final act.

When her mother died and, alone with the old woman, she had seen herself mistress of the house, she had broken off all her old philanderings and withdrawn into an unnatural reservation of her charms.

The village said she was above herself.

Thus she sat, staring at the old woman and the way the old woman's dying eyes were turned towards the stars, very golden in the blue of the May night through the fresh green lattice of the vine. To the left stood the white walls of the stables, before her the palisade and the orchard up the rising hill; and in through the acacias, from along the valley, by the stream, blew a gentle south wind, warm and yet fresh. Once more a din rose up in the village below them; shouting (a dispute), horses' hoofs; and then was shattered, isolated clatter of horses dispersing, the voices of the men more distant on either side, dogs barking as they passed the well-guarded village courtyards. It was the dispersal of the *kavana*. It was the village authorities, the gendarmes; her father; Radovan was there. She would soon know the news. Had they caught him, Artanovitch?

She was snatched back to reality by a tall figure, coming from the orchard through a gap in the palisade, into the courtyard. It was a massive man – not stout, but enormous, a giant, or so he seemed, outlined against the sky between the trees, standing on the slope above her – and the giant walked firmly and lightly up to her and swung off a shaggy fur cap; and, with a slight bow, that had a captivating grace, bid her a very good evening.

She caught her breath and stared, with bulging eyes, at the man, and even before she saw his face the lower half of her body, spine and legs, seemed suddenly paralysed. She turned

to the old woman for a lead, but the old woman had disappeared indoors and she was alone with this stranger, who was no stranger, whom she now wished to be a stranger. It was not so much by the familiar ring in the voice, although it had hardened more than a little in the past three years, as by Artanovitch's whole ambience, by an obscure complex of minute individual movements, that he was familiar, and struck something deeper than mere fear in her limbs. There before her was the bandit on whose head (dead or alive), the equivalent of one hundred pounds was proclaimed, and at whose heels were the gendarmes of whom the village that night was full. Nicholas Artanovitch, who that morning had taken Marko Lentchitch's horse and tied Marko Lentchitch up in the woods Belodor way, Nicholas Artanovitch, the beast at the sight of whom she had just declared she should die, stood before her.

But she could find nothing to say or do but utter a childlike faltering 'Good day to you.'

The great figure now towered over her. In the gloom she distinguished the twirls of his dark moustaches on his ivory cheeks, and the whites of his agile eyes. She saw, too, that he was not armed. She felt the eyes boring into her as he spoke.

'Militza,' he said. 'Surprised to see me, eh? Don't be alarmed! But take me inside where I can hide. Somebody may come any minute. Quick.'

And, indeed, there were already voices coming up the path through the fields towards the house. It was urgent to hide, but though it was a matter of his life, there was more command in his voice than any pleading for refuge. On what count did he then claim their hospitality, rose in Militza's thoughts.

But before she could question anything, he took her by the shoulders and drew her up unresisting from the bench and then led her himself into the house, pulling her by the arm.

Without a sound she followed him, hot all over. They passed through the kitchen into the large common room. Militza saw her grandmother had already lit the feeble oil lamp and hung it on the wall.

Solemnly Artanovitch shook hands with the old woman.

'Well come,' she greeted him.

'And finding you better, I hope,' he replied, exactly as if he had been the most usual, harmless, well-mannered visitor.

They all stood a moment, without saying anything, in the ill-lit great, bare room, which, in somewhat Turkish fashion, was furnished mainly by a broad bench, laid with carpets and cushions, round the greater part of the wall; though in the centre stood a plain deal table with four or five simple chairs.

Artanovitch stood taller than the lamp on the wall, and to Militza his face seemed that of a giant towering over her; but the old woman's leathery face showed neither surprise nor alarm; merely the servility of the woman to whomever comes as guest to the house – for clearly she seemed to accept Artanovitch as a guest, and even almost to be ready for him. But as they stood the voices and steps sounded outside.

It was the grandmother first came to life. She turned her head to the window, straining her feeble ears to catch who was coming. The voices sounded in the courtyard. Artanovitch left Militza, roughly; turned to the old woman.

'Quickly,' he said in a dry voice, 'where?'

Militza still stood as if in a dream. The silent swiftness of his arrival, his assurance, his majestic bearing had all carried her away, though even more still did the way in which the old woman seemed to take the outlaw's arrival as the most usual thing in the world amaze her.

'Eh, you, child,' she said, 'take him in there, put him in your little room. Then make coffee. Hustle, child.'

With that somewhat detached, somewhat sly amusement

at anything arranged by her, such as the old so often exhibit when making the young provide the excitements they have left for ever behind, the old woman seemed to chuckle sinisterly as she gave the pair of them, both granddaughter and harried bandit, a gentle good-humoured push towards the room. Herself she went out.

Militza opened the door in the corner, which led into a small square room, her room; and without a word Artanovitch followed her in. She was now trembling all over, and felt her face harshly flushed. There seemed no way of turning back. Something had already made it seem the inevitable thing to hide Artanovitch.

She left him there.

It was her father came into the yard, and Radovan and another man with him – and the blood began to pound unbearably at her temples as an instinctive thought told her the barred window of her little room would prevent Artanovitch from getting out and so that with his way through the big room barred he was a rat in a trap.

The old woman no doubt saw no reason why they should not have that one hundred pounds blood money. But the trick seemed too simple, too preposterous. What too could have persuaded Artanovitch (unless he had no idea the patrols were out, and in the village at that moment), to thrust his nose into such a simple trap? There was, in fact, something both in his assurance and in her grandmother's acceptance of it that confused all her reckonings.

She shut the door, without a word, and went through into the kitchen.

She found herself, in her trouble and alarm, doing what she had not done for long enough – obeying her old grandmother like a little child. Blindly she fudged in the embers, and knelt and blew the wood coals to a glow, and made coffee.

On the bench outside, once more (as they had been half an hour before), sat her father, and Radovan, and another would-be-suitor, the village tax-collector; and the old woman joined them.

While the sugar and water, on the slow coals, was boiling up, she went to the door of the kitchen and looked out. The moon had begun to rise from behind the bank of cloud that rimmed the horizon, and its silvery light festooned the house wall and the group on the bench with jagged patterns of vine. Nothing had changed but the lighting, breaking to a greater clarity, and the addition of tax-collector Yovan to the group, and in the glassy still and transparent air it seemed to Militza impossible that, so quickly and silently, the very man they were talking about was there, in refuge; in, of all places, her own room.

'Eh! Militza,' cried Yovan, greeting her, 'How goes it?'

She wanted both to scream and to whisper hissing in their ears, 'Kill him, kill him, he is in there, in my room, he cannot escape through the barred window!' but she found herself paralysed as if in a dream.

She could not break into the transparent moonlit bubble before her. It was easier to gape in front of the glassy wall of that sphere her eyes took in, and to ignore the rest, and so she ignored Radovan's tentacles gripping her and now those other tentacles of the man inside her room that seemed to be dragging her into a black waste. It was all chill round her, but yet she burned as if in an abyss of furnaces.

Mechanically she replied to Yovan, and mechanically she went back to her coffee-making.

When she had finished making it, she poured it into the little cups; three little cups of a service, and served the three men. For the moment she had become again like any other girl down the patriarchal countryside. She ceased to be

mistress of a house. Stupid thing, tethered to the hearth, she hovered on the fringe of the corsair world of the men.

There was still coffee left in the *giezhva*, for her granny and herself; and this she poured, with a return of old ways, into odd and cracked old cups. And side by side, at the edge of the group, the two women, old and young, gently supped at it. Not only the old woman, but Militza too took care (as was meet), not to sup louder than the men.

. . . . . .

Men, men—flamboyantly, for they were a little in drink – they sprawled over the countryside; and ornately fierce they raked the hills and woods clear of Artanovitch's gang; and Artanovitch himself (regardless of the fact that he had fooled them, so it seemed, very nicely), they trussed in their talk like a market hen.

'We'll give him a dose of warming his toes over a fire,' the tax-collector declared, referring to the wild tales of how Artanovitch extorted money. 'We'll let him see two can play at that game!'

He thumped the bench with his hairy fist.

'That's right, that's right,' he cried, and thumped the bench again. His eyes flared lividly above the black lump of his dandy moustaches.

'We'll show the swine what it was like for others before we string him up.'

''Twas neatly he got away,' – it was her father's turn to revile – 'that bloody young gendarmerie cock thinks too bloody much of brasso for his spurs to catch the likes of Nicholas Artanovitch. I wonder where the devil is. They say they missed tracing where he quit Marko's horse?'

'Right away over four-point hill she led 'em, did the mare, and then right over by Koupek and from Koupek straight as a die to Marko's house – well, that means he's out over four-

point hill way, eh? Or maybe he's lying low in Koupek. We'll cook his hash for him to-morrow, we'll sizzle the soles of his feet like he's sizzled a many other poor fellow's.'

This was the tax-collector again.

'But mark you here,' said Radovan, suddenly, starting up as if he'd thought of something. Militza's blood ran cold. 'It's my reckoning Nicholas Artanovitch is nowhere but in this village, and when we go over them tracks again to-morrow we'll know it.'

For a long age, in Militza's eyes, no one moved. Radovan, tense with sudden conviction, stood over them, beating out each word with one closed fist on the other palm. The tax-collector grinned at him. Her father sat, a little bent, but his face lit, from her side, sharply by the moon. There was an expression of boredom, even of weariness on it.

This went on endlessly, these horrible wax figures (only Radovan's eyes, in their glaring, were mobile, and the tax-collector's lips which in their unpleasant grin wriggled like little silvery fish).

Then Militza's father raised his head, thrust out his lips and shook his head deprecatingly.

'No such luck,' he said gloomily, 'no such luck. Were he in this village we'd soon know it and finish with him. Eh? Yovan?'

'Anyway,' Yovan said, 'they're pretty sure they've cut him off from his men, and that's a deal. It means that when a man faces him he dare lift a gun without getting a bullet in his back.'

'As to that,' Radovan assured him, 'there's no doubt but they've got him running alone. They separated him long before he got to his burrow in Belodor. No one knows yet how he got wind of their coming there. Those that put him up, anyway, have got twenty-pounders on their ankles and sore backs by now, I don't doubt.'

'And if we're to be up with the patrols in the morning, it's time we were abed,' the tax-collector said, 'and if he's in these parts it'll soon be over.'

He pulled a huge, shining new revolver from a pocket, and balanced it on his palm.

'I don't grudge using that.'

Militza shut her eyes.

'In these parts or out of 'em, Yovan,' Militza heard her father say. She forced her eyes to open, and, with horrible fascinated fear she saw his hand automatically fumbling, as he sat bent there on the bench, at his belt, 'He'll not last long if I get near.'

And *he*, of whom they talked in this way, was all the time in her room.

The other two men, noisily, prepared to go, but it seemed their handshakings and boastings and flourishings would never end. Eventually, however, the slow drowsiness of alcohol, after a day from sunrise in the open air, had its way; and half an hour later the little household was left to its own.

The moon had circled considerably far on her path; the rays slanted low, and fell clear on the wall of the house beneath the highest point of the vinery. Militza could not bring herself either to move or speak. Her father still sat, leaning against the wall, his head on his chest, made more pale and fatigued by the moonlight than he really was. Beside him on the bench sat the old woman.

The wind rustled. The animals in the stable could be heard, from time to time, coughing or moving. From the house came a deadly, an ominous silence.

At last the old woman, her grandmother, her father, Zhivko's, mother, said, as if it was the most natural thing in the world :

'You know, Zhivko, he's here already.'

III

MILITZA'S glassy world, as if it were an immense bubble, revolved and scintillated, revolved at enormous speed, and by its very movement was the more hideously immobile, more distant than before. In the centre of that bubble, in the harsh moonlight, leaning against the wall, his head sunk on his chest, sat her father, and beside him his wizened old mother. And, in answer to her quiet everyday – 'You know, Zhivko, he's here already' – all his answer was a pensive nod and then, slowly, (almost reluctantly, it seemed:)

'Yes, I thought he must be.'

Then, in a moment, the glistening bubble was shattered. With a short 'Well' and then a muttered oath, her father rose and quickly went indoors. She heard the door into the room open, then bang, then fastened on the hook; and that sharp sound, which opened another step in the mystery of that night, released the world without.

She and her grandmother, in the night breeze which had risen, were sitting on the bench eagerly facing each other, she with curiosity, and the old woman, evidently anxious to explain and so make sure of her behaviour.

'That's Nicholas Artanovitch,' the old woman said.

Militza nodded. She did not need to be told; and the silence from the house that met her straining ears was more ominous than any noise of angry voices or revolver shot – which she had half expected, which she had even feared.

She stared at her grandmother, yellow in the moonlight. She herself felt deathly white. At last she forced her paralysed tongue to speak, and, because of her knowledge now that Nicholas Artanovitch was no enemy in their house, she found

herself looking swiftly and furtively round (as if for lurking eavesdroppers) before she brought out a whispered:

'Why is he here?'

The old woman all the time watched her closely.

Could that headstrong twenty-year old girl, who in the last three years had grown to dominate the household, be trusted not to blunder into disastrous hysterics. One scream, echoing through the liquid night, and Radovan would be up at the house. He was certainly sitting out in his courtyard with a flask of wine in front of him, she knew his ways. He would hear and come. Thinking something like that, the old woman shrugged her shoulders, raised her eyebrows, gave a faint deprecating smile.

'How should I know?' her movements seemed to say, 'the reason for such an unimportant thing?'

Militza stared at her grandmother, yellow and horny-faced in the moonlight. She leant forward towards her, peered into her face. 'Why is he here?' she whispered again, 'why is Nicholas Artanovitch here? What call has he on us? Don't you know that if he's found here it is chains for us all, torture for us all. There's one hundred on his head to-day and there'll be two to-morrow, and we harbour him, he comes here as if it's his own house. Why? Tell me that, why?'

'Hush, my child,' the old woman said, 'everything in good time.'

She paused. Then she added:

'Your father, you see, is one of Artanovitch's oldest friends.'

'He was. Before Artanovitch began this' – her eyes shifted in fear – 'sort of life. He can't be father's friend now. How can he? He is an outlaw.'

'Yes, my child, and your father is one of his *yataks*. There's lots of things you don't understand yet. Where do you

think the money. . . .' But she was interrupted by her son, who suddenly appeared at the door.

The look of fatigue had gone; his eyes were bright. He ordered them inside, and as soon as they were in he locked the outer door after them. It was all the most usual thing in the world for the old woman; but for Militza it was all strange.

In the great room Artanovitch, his shirt and his tunic unbuttoned at the neck, was sitting at the head of the long table in the centre of the room. Before him on the table lay a revolver. His left elbow was negligently propped on the table, and his head on that hand; the other hand lay on the table, the fingers idly toying with the butt of the revolver.

Zhivko turned to his daughter.

'Food,' he said curtly, 'whatever there is ready; and drink; wine, water; quick.'

He had long enough waited for and feared this day, had Zhivko, this day when a mixture of vow of friendship and of wholesome fear of Artanovitch and his resolute band, (who very well knew how to put a hole through the back of a traitor) would compel him to risk house and freedom and even life to provide refuge for one of them, fugitive. Day by day for two months, (ever since through the treachery of one Hutchko, the Artanovitch gang's spring activities had begun with a terrible defeat that had broken it up and scattered it over three counties,) he had been following the movements of Artanovitch, through the news that was common knowledge, and the official police news that Radovan retailed to him, (as part of the price for his daughter). He had been watching Artanovitch draw nearer and nearer. He had been nervous and moody, (and that had been one of the reasons for finally letting Militza have the running of the whole house that year) till a message from Belodor three days before made it clear that the moment of the test was no

longer days, but merely hours away. Of all the band it was indeed Artanovitch himself he was to shelter. Since he had heard the patrols were out that morning at eight in the Blasco market he had been a changed man; and it was all he had been able to do to conceal his excitement from others.

His mother made for the kitchen, in obedience to his command, but he stopped her.

'You stay, mother,' he said, 'let my girl do a little. Sit here.'

He pointed at the table. The hardened old woman and her son, nervously taut, both sat down. His mother sat at the end, opposite Artanovitch, and he himself sat on Artanovitch's left hand. He watched Artanovitch's eyes, a little bloodshot from lack of sleep and from dust, and saw the yellow flickering glow go in waves over those coals that swam in blood as they followed Militza's springy, swaying walk, going to the kitchen.

Artanovitch was, Zhviko knew, an insatiable wencher; and at the moment, in the circumstances in which he was placed, it was not entirely displeasing to him to see the man's hungry look fixed on his daughter. If there were lust there, in it was for a time a certain guarantee for his own safety.

When Militza had disappeared into the kitchen, Artanovitch lowered his eyes and laid his hand on his revolver. Zhivko, out of the corner of his eye, saw his old mother's lips moving; always muttering to herself now, the old woman. She, at least, showed no signs of concern at the dangerous company at her table.

'I suppose,' thought Zhivko, ' that at that age it's all the same if you catch a chill and lie in a fever and die at home, or hungry and aching on the earth floor of a prison cellar.'

To him, of course, it was not at all the same, and his thought involuntarily clung to the entrance he had prepared

to the bandit's extempore hiding-place. He stood before it in thought, with suspicious Radovan, (who was always poking about the house). Radovan seemed to be grinning knowingly at him as he stared at the obvious signs of a secret door in the plaster round the false stove.

But a movement of Artanovitch started him from his dreaming; Artanovitch's fidgeting fingers suddenly flicked the revolver away from him; his eyes lit up. Militza had reappeared, carrying a great oval tray. Artanovitch's tired eyes, Zhivko could see, lit up more at the swollen curve of her bosom under the skirt drawn tight by the tray pressing on her belly than at the sight of food, though it was twenty-four hours since he had touched anything but the scrap of coarse maize bread he had taken with him from the house in Belodor.

On the tray was a huge chunk, practically half, of a four months pig, a dish of salted clotted cream, simple white cheese, young green peppers, chopped onion, huge chunks of dark brown bread and a great bottle of rosy wine.

'Please make yourself at home,' Militza said as she put the food on the table. The silence in that room weighed heavily on her, and weighed still heavier as they each took a knife and a hunk of bread and without speaking a word, drew food from the common dish and ate. She brought a flask of spirits, strong double-distilled stuff, and poured them out little flasklets of it. In silence, statuesque, they looked solemnly into each other's faces; then they clinked their flasklets and poured the burning stuff down their throats. Once more she filled them; once more, without a word, they poured it down their throats, but at the offer of a third Artanovitch spoke.

'Enough, Militza, child,' he said. 'Though there's no work afoot for a day or two, clear heads is wanted.'

He turned to her father.

'Eh? Zhivko?' he asked.

'That's right,' her father said, and puffed and blew through his burning lips, cramming bread into them to slake the fire of the little, green, scented capsicums. But that was all they said.

At the ominous easy reference to work to be done in a day or two Militza shivered.

Was it then possible that there, with the countryside swarming with patrols, this single man – and would her father be in it too – or were there still others? – begin pillaging, using their house for base?

What had passed, while she and her granny stayed under the vines in the moonlight, so silently behind those closed doors?

Was that revolver lying on the table a precaution against sudden attack; or had it played a part in an argument?

She remembered her father's words of less than half an hour before: 'In these parts or out of 'em, he'll not last long if I get near!' – while Artanovitch lay in her room. And then, when the old woman said, 'You know he's here already?' all her father had said was, 'I thought he must be.'

In the sombre light of the room, at that funereal table, the old woman began to speak.

''Twas before you were born, Nicholas, that Yovan Brilo, the Lord forgive him and rest his soul' – she crossed herself piously – 'lay here a couple of days, but that was before your father, Zhivko, pulled down the old kitchen; the wall along by the stove was double and there was like a narrow room you could get into out of the loft. We lowered him down by ropes. But he only lay here two days, 'tis very open country here, and his men were back beyond Blasco, just the same, and the patrols were hot after him.'

Artanovitch laughed. 'Yes, that's afore my time, granny; but there's still patrols to be out after me,' he said.

''Twas a fine hiding place, that wall. He only lay here two days. They searched the house, but they couldn't find him, but they won't search it now, not now. One of the Miloutinovitches – Radovan, you must know him, Nicholas – he's taking Militza for wife, so that puts things right. But Brilo lay here two days, he left the third night, but the patrols caught him out by Blasco Brewery, he laid out one and wounded another before they got him. He didn't get any trial, poor fellow, the gendarmes were so wild. The Lord forgive him and rest his soul, they just finished him off there and then ; I saw him after it lying for exhibition in Blasco Market Place, cut and bludgeoned about he was, him that had been so fine a fellow. . . .'

Militza's eyes were large and staring.

Had their peaceful house, then, become a bandits' lair and always been a bandits' lair, and her father a *yatak*, her old grandmother suddenly revealing this contact with the criminal world?

'Enough, mother,' she heard her father cry, 'you'd give the statue in Blasco Market Place the judders, let alone our good friend here, who's had a hard day, and has got 'em close on his heels.'

Artanovitch grinned. 'Take more than that to make me shiver,' he said, 'but it wouldn't take much to make me sleep.'

Militza saw her father glance anxiously at the old woman. 'You take Nicholas to show him,' she said. 'Militza'll lay a bed for him.'

Her father got up. 'It's the best I could do,' he said, 'till a couple of weeks I never thought. . . .'

'That's all right, Zhivko,' said Artanovitch.

'Anyway,' her father said, 'there's two ways out of this one. Come this way.'

They went out into the yard. Artanovitch carried his revolver cocked ready, trod cautiously, watched her father's every movement.

'He'll not last long if I get near,' still dinned in Militza's head. Did Artanovitch then fear treachery, to carry his revolver thus ready? She shivered again.

She sat down at the table, helpless.

Her grandmother was dragging bedclothes for Artanovitch through into the common bedroom of the old people, her father's room, where he and the old woman and anybody else who might be there slept. Was Artanovitch actually going to sleep there, where any man might find him?

Then they came back and her father led Artanovitch through into it. Against the wall was a white square stove that was never used – a stove built of bricks and clay lump, plastered and whitewashed. There was no iron piping to be seen – the smoke went straight into the brick chimney in the wall.

'Here,' said her father, 'look.'

He seized the stove in his arms. It was about five feet high and two and a half feet square, standing out from the wall. Its base was a sheet of iron on the floor. He wrenched at it, and, to Militza's amazement, it came away, sideways, revealing a widening crack between it and the wall. Another fierce wrench, and it had opened like a clumsy low door, and Militza knew now why this stove was never used – it was merely a hollow shell – and the wall behind it was strange and hollow too.

Her father took the lamp from her hand and held it inside.

'There you are!' he said, triumphantly, to Artanovitch.

It was a small chamber, not more than six feet high, a yard wide, and about three yards long – the length of the wall of the room.

Her grandmother called her and she went. Mechanically, as if she did this sort of thing every day of her life, she carried the straw mattress and other bedding into the secret closet and made a bed. She worked quickly and no one spoke a word. Candles were brought, matches, a large pitcher of fresh water, a good supply of food, and – why – she wondered? a short-handled axe.

Artanovitch expressed his satisfaction and went in. Then, as the stove closed on him, Militza saw his burning eyes were fixed on her.

A flush in an instant covered her cheek and ears. She now realized that all the time she had been bending there in the narrow hole, and crouching in and out, making his bed and bringing his supply of water and food, Artanovitch had been eyeing her with ravenous eyes. And as the stove closed on him he shook his head at her, tossing it backwards, and the understanding greeting was accompanied by an intimate smile. The intimacy of it dismayed her. Many an innuendo, that she had only learned since then to understand, spoken when, three years ago, he had been an honoured guest in their house, returned in her memory and frightened her. Her heart beat violently and she was horribly alarmed; no longer because a bandit with a price on his head lay in that secret closet, (that was still a mystery to her) but because there was a fierceness and brazenness in the hunger with which his eyes circled round the full outline of her breasts that she had never seen in the candlelight of Radovan's furtive, self-contented eyes.

. . . . . .

The stove back in place, the line where stove met wall, once the stove had been edged a little this way and that, showed no more than as the usual crack that comes round that sort of stove when, during the cold winter nights, it is

heated so hard and so drily that the straining plaster cannot hold. The edges of the crack, with little flakes of plaster hanging loose, held by the hog's hairs with which it was mixed, looked perfectly natural, blacked as it was a little by the wood smoke which one would suppose had escaped from the crack during the last days of winter. The false stove was beautifully done, though how long it had been there Militza, who had never suspected it, did not know.

'Militza must know all about it now,' said her father.

'Come, Militza, dearie,' her grandmother said, and took her by the arm and led her from her reverie at the stove out into the courtyard. She led her to the cart shed, a lean-to against the end of the housewall, (at the corner by the acacias that gave over the stream) and led her inside.

'It's here,' she said, 'you'll have to know now. Look!'

She put her hand on the plastered housewall, which formed the back wall of the shed. And when Militza could not understand she showed her how the plaster wall went out at an angle from the wall of the shed against the courtyard, so that at the outer end, by the acacias, it stood a yard further out than it should. But Militza had always known the house-wall wasn't straight – before the shed was built on to the wall, when she was small, she had known that.

'Hahaha!' her grandmother cackled. 'You don't understand? Come inside!'

They went inside. Yes, and the wall of the room inside, too, was not straight with the main room and the kitchen. She still could not see where there was room for a closet a yard wide in the space of a two-brick wall. And then it dawned on her. The wall outside sloped one way – the wall inside the other way from the straight; and the result was a hollow wall, the secret closet.

'Oh!' she cried, in amazement at the cunningness of the trick, and put her hands on her granny's shoulders.

'It's a fine place,' the old woman said, 'and you're a bonny girl! He'll get away all right.'

'But why?' Militza suddenly asked again. 'Why do we. . . ?'

'Shhh! You'll learn all in time.'

'And the two openings. Father said there were two ways out?'

'Yes,' her granny said. 'This one, and' – once more she took her into the cartshed and there pointed to a square of plaster that was whiter than the rest, in the bottom corner – 'that! That's all double brick wall, but in that spot the bricks aren't mortared, they're only stood in with straw to deaden the sound the same as anywhere else in case anyone taps it; but the plaster is all there is of real wall. Listen. If the gendarmes are in the house and there's no escape, Artanovitch'll have to make a dash for it. The signal is – a handful of straw burnt in the stove. It's laid in ready.'

She opened the iron door of the grate to show Militza.

'He gets the smoke even if he's asleep and it wakens him. He smashes the plaster down with that axe and off he goes.'

Without another word Militza went to her room and sank slowly on to the bed.

It was hard to believe it was all a matter of the life of a man, who had half a dozen lives to answer for, and whom anybody would get a reward for shooting at sight; and that there was a good chance she, too, would find herself in chains if the man were discovered there. She sat thus, half in stupor half in thought, a very long time into the night.

IV

ARTANOVITCH blew out the candle and slept like a log. When at last he awoke his miserable hole was lit by a dirty cobwebby light that filtered from the dazzling outer day through spaces between the rafters at the eaves, ten feet above his head as he lay there cramped on the bedding. This light was reflected but dimly by the rough, dark, unplastered walls of brick. As he lay, exerting his eyes to catch the real outlines of his hiding-place, his hand moved almost instinctively along the wall to make quite sure he could find a way to open air. For otherwise he was a prisoner. Alone from within he dared not move the stove, as for all he could know some stranger might be in the house and discover it.

But at the same time he could not break out through the outer wall without enormous risk.

He was, in short, at the mercy of Zhivko; but Zhivko was at the mercy of all his band and all his partisans scattered, a subterranean network, about the peaceful hills and plains of their countryside, and he did not feel too uneasy. Yet how easy for Zhivko to deal with him, bottled up in that hollow wall! Zhivko's eyes, however, had told him what a lot the gold payment he was to get for his services in the next few hours meant to him – an outlaw buys every day of his life with gold – and Zhivko knew, only too well, as he had reminded him, that if he, Artanovitch, with the sum there was on his head, and the patrols about the district, were delivered to justice from a hiding-place in Zhivko's housewall it was at least not impossible that instead of a hundred pounds there would be ten years penal servitude for Master Zhivko.

. . . . . .

Day was well on its course; the air in the closet was growing

hotter and hotter. Artanovitch took bread and cheese and began to eat. The house was deathly silent, there were no sparrows in the eaves, there was no sound from the yard, the murmur of life that penetrated to the hole in the wall was faint and far away. Zhivko, he knew, rode at that moment with the patrolmen and Marko Lentchitch and the rest of them, up his tracks to the copse, trying to track him, trying to find out where he took to foot, and abandoned the horse, and so to track him down. Night would have damped with dew the leaves he disturbed, walking in the copse, and the leaves with which he had tried to hide his footsteps; the dry air and the breeze would the day before have erased other signs of his passage. Was there not then a very good chance that they would fail to find his tracks? He had forgotten the use of hounds. It was lucky for them all that Zhivko had not.

But of Zhivko's caution Artanovitch was ignorant; and on it he could not rely. And the swift onrush of the baying of dogs, followed by horses' hoofs and loud excited voices before he even had time to eat his fill of the cheese, made him start to his feet. God blast them, they were already there; and it might be a matter of minutes for them to be tapping on the walls of the house. No man, he knew, where every man might be false – as anywhere any man may – was above suspicion; and even that smug-faced Radovan who was to marry Zhivko's daughter, would not shrink one second from turning the house upside-down if the hunted bandit's footsteps, as told by those snuffling dogs, led to the house.

He sprang to his feet. But for his sandals he was full dressed. He looked round for them.

God Almighty, he could not find them !

He cursed his sleepy carelessness of the night before, and flung the bedding this way and that lest they were, it might

happen, covered by it; then in a flash remembered, stood stock still, prickly heat coming over him.

He had remembered – he had taken them off in the house to move quietly; he had left them out in the great common room; the dogs would find them there; he would have to run for it barefoot! He gritted his teeth! The wasted night! Had he but known it would end like this (half a dozen bullets through him as, a barefooted fool, he sprang over the little brook to give the gendarmes' horses a run). Rapine! Why had he not made a scarlet night of it, put a bullet through that fool Zhivko, silenced the old woman's claptrap chaps for her, spent the last few hours teaching that hussy Militza the meaning of a man!

This was the thought that moved in him.

He strained his ear. He could not quite hear what they were saying. The voices carried badly through the wall and the cartshed, but they were loud enough and quarrelling. Above them all rose Zhivko's voice. The din went on, the dog was yelping this way and that, it seemed; no doubt the tracks across the hard-panned courtyard gave a poor scent; perhaps – a ray of hope gleamed – in this well-kempt house the yard had already been swept that morning, the scent spoiled.

He stood, crouched a little, his revolver in his left hand, ready; his right hand clutching the axe, ready to break way through for a last dash for freedom. At last, dread sound, he heard the dogs give a howl of delight; they had found the scent; the patrol and the peasants yelled too; he clasped the axe tighter, strained hard to catch anything they cried as they swarmed across the courtyard storming the house. Out of the confusion the words 'after him, after him' beat clearest.

He shivered slightly, but then, to his unutterable amaze-

ment, the voices began to grow, not louder and menacing, but fainter. They were going away; in a couple of minutes could scarcely be heard. Some miracle was accomplished; and though there was no means of knowing how long the false chase would go on, how soon the blasted animals would be back at the house, snuffling at the tell-tale crack round the stove, for the moment he blessed those hounds for what he thought was their faulty noses.

He sat down again. The air was warmer than ever. Even the protection of the cart-shed roof did not keep the heat from the outermost wall of his cell, and sultry air trickled too through the openings above. He took a long drink of wine, put his revolver back into its holster, and lay peacefully back. He had, no doubt, long hours to wait before, perhaps in the silence of the coming night, Zhivko would open his prison and tell him the news.

The wine put him at his ease, gently inflamed his blood, set free his thoughts, and as he lay solaced on the bed all he craved for was a woman. The secret narrow bed, fast in the dumb windowless walls, appealed to him for the uses of pleasure.

The last several weeks had been weeks of gnawing abstinence.

All the winter, mocking the police, he had been a dandy and *rentier* in the capital with Juliana, his mistress. And after this town winter of palling forced pleasures, with spring, and everything in bud and in rut round him, had come the first season of work. And with that, through treachery, followed almost immediately weeks of endless and fruitless night escapades through woods, along river banks, fording the cold water endless times to foil his pursuers, on stolen horses, in waggons of hay; weeks of lying hid in stables and cellars and hidden rooms, and even a

fortnight before this, for two long days and nights, in a barrel lowered to the bottom of a well.

But although this restless movement, lack of peace and scanty hard food thinned him and wore down a good half of his energy, there was still more than enough of it left over after rare catches with loose wenches in the villages he passed through, and one hot night of fierce love with the widowed sister of one of his *yataks*.

What had become of Juliana he did not know. Times enough he had sent one or another of his men to find her. But even the first messages, before his band was broken up, to tell her to join him in Beshtavi (where, by bribing the local captain of gendarmerie well, he held a regular 'stronghold) brought no response. And when the band was broken up and the messages were that she should follow him, first to one place, then to another, of course, no word came from her.

Those of his messengers he had seen again told him everything by their cautious, timid reticence.

He had not the least doubt that Hutchko (the traitor to whom he owed his present situation) was enjoying Juliana's clinging, yet well-spiced favours in the soft air of the town. In his mind's eye he saw her, strutting into the first bars of the town with Hutchko, who in tight-waisted coat of fashionable cut and 'real English stuff' tailed, looking like a successful boxer, after her. He could see the square white teeth he knew so well the taste of, flashing up and down, marshalled by the gold thick on them of which she was so proud, in their apparently starving attack on a caviare sandwich.

Ugh! He shivered.

They disgusted him, somewhat, all of them, women – for she, Juliana, he had no doubt, would still be ready enough for him again if only he managed to defeat the gendarmerie and re-establish his position. She liked him well enough, of

course, because he was no weakling and all that, but she did not like him well enough to rough it with him. Oh, no!

The little bitch!

And he lay stone still, trying by immobility to ease his flushed and over-excited flesh that his brooding reflections turned to a myriad lecherous little tongues to goad his body. Then the wine in him, at idle midday in his stifling hole, led him in slow progression into lethargy, and lust slowly merged into half-slumber, in formless fleshy dreams.

. . . . . .

Thirty-two. Thirty-two years, ten months. His thirty-third year ending. Two months more and thirty-three years of his life would have gone; a mere few months beyond that appeared, pressing closely one on the other, forty, forty-five, fifty. Time, since he had begun to live by the force of never-dormant cunning and ever-ready arms, pitted, from frontier to frontier, against the rifles of law and order, had quickly doubled and redoubled its uneasy speed; and all too soon would all be gone, even if . . . even if . . . good fortune. . . .

And he ran, paralysed by present death, up a tawny grass slope against a hot dry breeze. Pah, pah, pah . . . short, sharp cracks, in a dusty whirl; a hot thud on his thigh; a hotter thud in his back; and he fell, choking. They had got him; all was ended; at thirty-two years and ten months.

He winced and then he frowned and swore to himself, and sat up, pressing his palms on the floor to support himself. 'Come,' he said to himself, 'this won't do.' In spite of the horror of death he had no doubt, when he carefully balanced all he had done before and all he had done after, that his shooting the bank manager in Hrastodol which opened his outlaw's career was the best thing he had ever done. The best thing, at least, if it was his spiritual welfare for which he

cared, for by that step he ceased to be a peasant and became an individual, a man; battening on others, but at least by no humbug, at least at the risk of that life. A fair game, none of your merchant's smug security!

Yet death, in spite of what reason said, reason that grappled valiantly with the value of his delight in freedom, adventure, and force, became, he had to admit, every day more ominous. Shot running or tied to a post in a fresh-dug grave by a squad, or dangled up by the neck in a congregation of smug men in black, choking, choking, done in, in a foul hole, a rat in a trap – for what if, after all, Zhivko. . . ?

. . . . . .

It was the sound of sobs broke in on his deép reverie of the delights that might any hour be no more. His ears, pounding with blood, in his devastating meditation suddenly caught the sound of sobs, a girl's sobbing, bitter sobbing on the other side of the wall.

Militza, he was sure.

Yet why sobbing? Her father taken? Suspect? His heart thumped. But yet if it was because they suspected, had taken Zhivko, why didn't they come on, search the house?

No. Then?

Once more his heart plodded on its regular beat, though pressing large in him as he thought of that full young body through the wall, for he became increasingly sure that he himself, in some way or other, lay at the root of those sobs. He took his life in his hands, laid it in the hands of chance, let all depend on the girl, Militza or any other, if it was not Militza. He knelt on the bedding and deliberately tapped on the inner wall with the butt of his revolver.

The result was instantaneous. Dead short the sobbing stopped, gone as suddenly as it had first fallen on his ears. As he strained, listening, his head pressed against the rough

bricks he distinctly heard someone move – get up so rapidly that a chair fell crashing over. Then there were quick steps, hurrying away. And silence.

And while he waited, axe in one hand and revolver in the other, full now of fears lest it had been a stranger (one of Militza's friends, perhaps) and that she had gone to give the alarm, he found himself again alone with his seething thoughts. In that uneasy ripe mass Militza had already become a cruel ferment.

V

THE night of Artanovitch's arrival, after Artanovitch had been installed in his hiding-place, after the old woman and his daughter were abed, Zhivko sat on in the great gloomy room till long after midnight. Cigarette after cigarette burned away between his lips, but the dead stumps he methodically crushed in a saucer. He was recalling all he had read in the daily paper's feuilletons and criminal reports of the modern detection of crime, and all he had seen of it on the few occasions, landmarks in his life, when he had been to the Blasco cinema. Crimes, he had learned, are detected by little things. When at last he got up he carefully threw the little heap of brown cigarette ends into the midden at the bottom of the courtyard. Nobody would know, by cigarette ends, at least, how long he had sat that night. He then began to deal with the great problem that faced him, for he knew gendarmes had ridden off that night to Blasco for the bloodhounds they had there. Before they came and got to work, Artanovitch's scent must be hid.

He had come in by the orchard fence, the old woman had said; just appeared suddenly, while they (the old woman and Militza) were sitting alone. He must have come stealthily by the fence. Zhivko equally stealthily crossed the yard to this fence, to where some empty barrels stood, and climbed on to one of them and looked at the long orchard grass below. The moon was sloping now, very low, soon to set, and its shadowy rays laid a distorted orchard filigree on the lush grass. He seemed to see there what he imagined he would see – an oval pale patch of flattened grass, ringed round by the edge of the shadow on the side of the moon of that which had not been laid; and coming towards it the silvery

smears on the dark, green grass where feet had swished their way.

He slipped back, off the crest of the fence, on to the barrel again; crouching, in shadow; then he pulled a newspaper parcel from inside his tunic and unwrapped it. He took a pair of sandals from the paper – Artanovitch's sandals – providentially forgotten in the main room. He pulled them on, carefully folded up the newspaper in which he had carried them, and then swung himself over the fence. For a couple of minutes he trampled deliberately on the beaten grass and then he crept away, crouching all the time, down towards the acacias, through them, and over the tiny stream.

Once on the opposite bank of the stream he paused, and peered down. In the soft clay of the bank, glitteringly plainly, were the clear imprints of his feet. He then made his way on, cautiously over the hillside to the meadow, about a quarter of a mile away, where one of his own horses, hobbled, was grazing. He had laid his false scent – now was the time to escape from it. He whistled to his horse, called it softly, and it waited for him. He mounted it and rode gently down to the high road.

Half an hour later he was striding swiftly along – now in his own sandals – the others he had buried with the paper by the roadside – on his way home. Had he met anybody the answer was pat.

'Where are you bound at this time o' the night?'

'One o' my horses got loose, thought I heard it down the Blasco road, and that's where it was, too.'

But he met no one.

The night, but for the barking of dogs and the first crowing of cocks, was still; a country night. The patrols were abed, to be fresh for the chase and the capture of the morrow – there was nothing, anyway, to be done with a man like

Artanovitch at night; and soon Zhivko was walking easily, with no attempt to conceal his movements, up the foot path from the road towards his house. The expression on his face was easier; the eyes had a sly delight shining in them. It was about two of the morning; and he lay down, dressed as he was, for a brief slumber before the day, a trying day, would break.

Day, in early summer, came all too eagerly. As Zhivko, in the early hours, slipped quickly to a light sleep, the cocks all around were already clamouring, and in less than two hours the luminous night (the moon sunk behind a bank of cloud at earth level) slipped off its bluish cloak and pulled on grey. At half-past four the eastern sky made its morning toilet of rose-petal pink. The peasant world began to stir. There were cries of men and the treading of horses, a continuous subdued hullabaloo that was not customary in the village of a morning. It was the patrolmen already assembled; waiting, no doubt, for the car with the bloodhounds to arrive from Blasco.

Zhivko awoke with a start, and in two minutes he was afoot. The fresh morning air was soured with the ferment of fragmentary sleep. He hammered on Militza's door, shouting to her:

'Up then, lie-abed, up now, there's work for you to be doing.'

Four times he had to hammer on her door, four times he called her, four times he heard her sleepy answer before she appeared, for so spoiled and self-willed had she lately become that this was long, long before her usual time.

And when she appeared he seized her, astounded, by the shoulder.

'Young bones, and as slow as that!' he jeered. 'Take your broom and get to work!'

He swept his arm in jerky gestures about the rooms and the yard.

'Water the yard and sweep it!'

He knew it was all most unexpected from him; but two things, immediate and future, were fixed in his mind. One was that the yard should be cleaned of any compromising traces while there was yet time; and the other that the cleaning should be done by his daughter. He had, till somehow Artanovitch's arrival had reminded him, forgotten that he was a man, and head of his own household.

. . . . . .

While Zhivko rode after Artanovitch with the village and the gendarmerie Militza and her granny sat in the fresh shade on the bench in the courtyard. Before them lay the courtyard, meticulously swept, the fragments of chaff drawn like iron filings on a magnetized field into the feathery lines the besom had followed; and dust and fragments of chaff were mottled with black where water had been sprinkled to cool the air before the house against the coming heat.

There was no change in the old woman. Her yellowish pouched face stared as it always did, toothless, from her clean black kerchief; but Militza was limp and cowed; and being cowed made her soft cheeks seem fuller, rounder, her mellow eyes larger, duller, her buxom shoulders twice as gentle, twice as sloping. She brought her morning mug of milk to her lips slowly and indefinitely; sipped it with lips that hung lifeless on the rough edge of the mug; set it down again slowly and carefully as if it were cracked in a thousand and one places. Her father's sudden turn in treating her, that she knew was in some strange way connected with Artanovitch's coming, made her lazy flesh itch with resentment at the same time as it was warm with a dull glow of satisfaction.

But her resentment filled her world of thought that morning with sullen revolt.

She wanted to tell the old woman she would marry Radovan now, for that would be escape from this, but she knew the old woman would laugh at her for switching round so very quickly from the night before. The knowing old cackle, that old cackle which always had a spice of the lecherous in it, would whip her smarting body to despair and tears.

Yet her tongue, guided by other forces than her will, did the deed before she was properly aware of it; and, moreover, frightened her by all that it revealed.

'I wonder whether Radovan will come back with father, this morning,' she said.

And as she said it a fiery flame flooded her cheeks. The old grandmother pointed her nobbed finger and laughed softly and gently, but with that knowing leering timbre that made Militza shudder. Then as she shuddered, her flush flamed fiercer and fiercer, for she herself realized what her grandmother did not know – the real cause of that tell-tale flush in her cheek. It was not Radovan, but he, the other, Artanovitch, who, despite her will, would stand before her in her mind's eye, not smart, well-groomed, well-kempt, strutting, with flashing eye and brand-new shoes, as Radovan always was, but crouching, eyes bloodshot, hair tousled and dirty, in torn socks, in a dirty, dark, rough-brick hole in a wall; and this one's eyes, with the ease of the elastic suckers of a monster squid, held fast to her body, her breasts, her belly, and drew, with fierce thirst, at her very entrails.

The more, guilty, amazed at herself, she flamed at the thought of Artanovitch, the nearer did she come to swooning into that animal embrace, with warm unresisting flesh, drawn by those burning patient eyes.

So, in the moment when her father's sudden harshness, his sudden becoming again like other fathers in the village, prompted her to welcome the marriage that was being arranged (and that, anyway, she had known she might have to accept) she suddenly found herself in dark and evil thoughts. She was aghast, and the seconds while she faced her old grandmother's affectionate but mocking laugh grew to years. She felt she was writhing in the clutch of something disastrous, from which there was no escape.

In a sleepless nightmare, beneath the crystal-clear summer sky stood her world now, the house where all her life she had lived. Now she saw that home was a foul place, a bandit's lair. And in the centre of this world, now icy darkness, aghast she saw Artanovitch, a sort of god, the ruler of it all. And worst of all was the knowledge that this in no way repelled her.

Although the revelation of what her father was had stricken her to the roots of her being with horror, although she was shaken with trembling as she felt the bloodhounds drawing nearer and nearer, bringing them all, perchance, to shame in chains, she could do nothing to prevent Nicholas Artanovitch from being the guilty centre of her thoughts. Against him there was no anger in her heart for the disaster that was coming, for in thought, she found, she was with him, in body drawn to him. The result of this was that this not very intelligent, not very courageous but pleasure-loving farmer's daughter instinctively sought to act so as to escape from herself.

Perhaps she even understood dimly that this was the real reason she turned to accept oily Radovan, to be engulfed in a large, petty, and most respectable family.

It was a way of salvation.

To change from Militza, the cynosure of half a dozen

villages and a little market town, to Mrs Radovan, which she had always abhorred as a living death, now meant to enter a haven of blessed repose.

Yet in that very moment a reaction came on her again. She rose dismayed before that other Militza, behind whom glowed the flame of another, a terrible, desperate, magnificent world. It was then that she sprang suddenly from the table and rushed indoors, and flung herself down by the wall of Artanovitch's hiding-place and burst into passionate tears.

VI

ZHIVKO'S studied cunning, his night scent-laying, saved them all. The gendarmes rode out, a little force of seven, strengthened by the four that came out from Blasco with the dogs, who did not arrive till half-past nine.

'You b fools,' Lieutenant Sima yelled at them as they stood gaping before him in the little village square of Sintzi, 'do you think the scent's going to develop a stronger odour with the passage of time after the fashion of your own addled pates?'

And with them rode, breathing revenge, Marko Lentchitch, both Miloutinovitches, a dozen other men, and Zhivko, who managed, with the aid of a tot of *rakia*, to be his usual self in spite of a night without sleep. They rode up to the little copse, they let the hounds sniff their fill of some clothes and a pair of sandals they believed were Artanovitch's (that had been obtained from Belodor).

But when the two hounds tore off from the copse along the ridge straight towards Sintzi they cursed the stupid animals. They could not believe that Artanovitch had abandoned the horse there, so near to the village, in broad daylight, and so they suspected that he had laid a false scent before he galloped on. And, to Zhivko's malicious delight, they dragged the dogs away from the scent and followed the track of Lentchitch's horse away till the mare's gallop had clearly become a canter and the canter slowed to a walk.

Anywhere there, they thought, Artanovitch must have sprung from the horse's back but yet not only were there no visible tracks for them to see, but the dogs too failed to pick up any trail. And, every moment more mystified – with Lieutenant Sima cursing the Blasco men for their useless

dogs – they followed the trail right round to Lentchitch's paddock, whither his horse had found its way. There they held a conference.

'Curse your waddling dogs,' cried Lieutenant Sima, 'there absolutely must be a trail somewhere, and they simply can't pick it up. Made fools of us !'

The sergeant from Blasco who had brought the dogs at last insisted on speaking. When he had tried to do so back at the copse he had been told by short-tempered Lieutenant Sima that he was there to bring the dogs and not to bark for them. He said now, a little timidly:

'The trail, sir, can't be nowhere but at them trees where the dogs took it, however of that Artanovitch it may appear to leave his horse there.'

'What?' Sima snapped.

'The trail, sir, can't be nowhere but at them trees where the dogs picked it up.'

'And where, may I ask, Sergeant, does it go?'

'That's what I've brought these dogs to bark about, sir,' the sergeant replied.

The peasants in the party rode behind, and tossed pleasantries to and fro. So long as Artanovitch did not trouble them they did not, as a body, much mind how he got on, and there were, in fact, some among them who really admired his skill in eluding them. Lieutenant Sima rode in front, biting his lips. He hated being made a laughing-stock. He did not like to admit it, but though the dogs were his only help he was as sceptical of them as the peasants were. The sergeant and his party, with the dogs beside them, rode in the centre of the group.

And thus, a little crestfallen, they rode up again towards eleven o'clock to the copse behind the village.

As they drew up to it the sergeant whistled to his dogs,

and the dogs sprang forward to the trees. In a minute they had found again the scent they had not been allowed to follow, and were howling away towards Sintzi. The whole cavalcade followed. Though he was no coward Zhivko's heart beat heavily, for the Blasco sergeant's assurance and faith in his dogs was ominous. The sergeant kept on declaring.

'This ain't the first rat they've ferreted out.'

How like a rat indeed was Artanovitch in his wall.

But Lieutenant Sima remained sceptical, and, with one exception, so did all the villagers. How, he thought, could Artanovitch have dared to double back into the pursuing patrol's headquarters to spend the night? It was hardly feasible he would go back to Belodor. He must know all too well that all his earths in that country had been stopped; all his *yataks* in chains. He must have known that if he went back into enemy country, he went not only with no friend, but with a courageous enemy in every man who a few weeks before would have fled before him.

What is more stimulating to peasant courage as a target than a beaten, hounded fugitive running his broken last lap?

The one exception to the general scepticism was Radovan Miloutinovitch. The night before, more through the desire for bombast of such a fine fellow when a little in drink, he had declared, 'Mark you, it's my reckoning Nicholas Artanovitch is nowhere but in this village.' And, apprehensive, Zhivko now watched as the dogs led them towards the village how his heavy jowl, made to seem heavier still by the close-trimmed black lump of moustache, was lit with stubborn self-satisfaction.

Radovan was not entirely to blame for being insufferable. When your brother is head of a village, and your father's dealings in cattle have, (apart from your own later) left you well provided for, and you are a peasant farmer *a cut above*

the average with modern ideas and the entry of a score of houses in the capital and of any house you like in Blasco; and in the pink of health, and careful to shave absolutely every day and to trim down the little black box-like border on your upper lip, and be the swell man of the village, and be preparing to marry the finest girl in the whole neighbourhood, you can be forgiven a deal of tendency to arrogance.

Radovan, as he looked round him at the dull faces of the gendarmes, which reflected nothing, and then at Lieutenant Sima's nervous town-bred lines, smiled involuntarily, because it was so clear how much finer a fellow he himself was. Last night it was only for effect he had declared Artanovitch was in the village; but there they were, going over his tracks, which led thither, and he was now ready to believe his boasting declaration was keen sight, almost prophecy. He, Radovan Miloutinovitch, once more was right.

He eyed the two bloodhounds.

'Clever beasts, good doggie, eh?'

There was condescending delight on his fat cheeks, and he lit a cigarette and handed one to the sergeant from Blasco. He knew his job, that fellow did, Artanovitch was going to turn out to be hidden in Sintzi.

Then he realized what that meant.

They had, then, a *yatak* in their midst. He thought. Perhaps most likely, if so, it was one of them that rode there, for *yataks* are often enough the prosperous farmers in a village. It was one of those riding there, and he began to wonder, with a light of inspiration, if Marko Lentchitch's story of the robbery of his horse in the Belodor Woods was not a put-up blind, and of all people it was Marko Lentchitch who was the *yatak*, and Artanovitch was consequently lying at that very moment in his house. That, by God, would explain why the tracks of the horse, without any sign of

Artanovitch leaving them, led right round to Lentchitch's paddock.

But then, these they were following? He was puzzled, and he eyed Lentchitch out of the corner of his eye. The enormous man, well proportioned, was riding erect, and his great moustaches were waxed to stiff short spikes, and his eyes had a set light in them, and he scarcely looked to left or right – could Radovan see anxiety on his face?

But the dogs had now led them to just above Zhivko's courtyard, and there, to everyone's amazement, they turned baying down the orchard. They then stopped, evidently puzzled, at the very bottom of the orchard, by the courtyard palisade. Terribly excited, they snuffled to and fro round a patch of trampled grass.

The moment had come to act.

' My God!' Zhivko cried, 'and by the saints, where was I? He lay here last night and not one of us knew it!'

He turned sharply to Radovan. 'Did you hear nothing as we sat last night?'

'Not a sound,' Radovan replied.

He was more astonished than anybody to see where the tracks led, and in his surprise sounded a note of dismay.

Lieutenant Sima glared at them both. He was not out to respect personalities. Where lay his quarry, there was his duty. If the tracks led to Zhivko's house Zhivko's house should be searched and Zhivko arrested. In a trice he had given a nod to his men who were ready for it – they were used to that sort of thing.

Radovan, in his dismay at finding his intended father-in-law might prove to be the *yatak* stared round him; and then he saw that he and Zhivko stood in a ring of ready gendarmes.

'What does this nonsense mean?' he began to protest.

'Steady on, Radovan, my boy,' Zhivko said. 'Lieutenant

Sima knows his business better than we do, eh?' and he smiled wryly, yet good-humouredly at the commander of the gendarmerie. 'If Artanovitch has earthed here, well, we're obviously suspect till it's been looked into.'

Radovan glared, and shrugged his shoulders angrily. Lieutenant Sima addressed him:

'You were here last night, you don't deny it?'

'Why should I deny it?'

'And who else?'

'What does it matter who else?' Radovan, feeling insulted, again began to get angry. He impetuously shook off Zhivko's restraining hand from his sleeve. 'We sat here after you'd got back from catching nothing to decide what we'd do about it, and you have the insolence to suspect us? Yovan Matitch can prove what I say.'

'Ah,' said Lieutenant Sima, 'so Yovan Matitch was there,' and in two winks he had sent a man off for Yovan Matitch.

Meanwhile the sergeant had led his dogs through the gap in the fence into the yard. At a table in the yard sat the old woman, peeling potatoes, but she was utterly unmoved by the gendarmerie. The sergeant and his dogs beat to and fro in the yard, but they could find no scent, and one of the animals was soon back to the orchard.

Then the whole scene suddenly changed. The dog yelped and to his yelp came the answering yelp of the other dog, which tore through the gap to join the first. The dogs' howling as they raced off on a new scent across the little brook interrupted the little comedy. Zhivko merely shrugged his shoulders – 'There you see, Radovan,' he said, 'it's all over. He lay behind the fence a while and then cleared off.'

Lieutenant Sima, of course, saw his mistake; saw, too, that Zhivko Trifounatz was a sensible, understanding fellow. There was no need to waste apologies on him for a mistake

that was merely routine duty. In a couple of minutes the whole crowd of them were away again, cantering over the fields towards the desert of the Blasco road.

But when they reached that to their great mortification they were baffled once more. Beyond the road no scent carried them, so that just at the moment when everything seemed to be solved, the chase came lamely to an end.

Who could say where, along that dusty highway, on the fourteen kilometres to Blasco, the fugitive had left the high-road again, or if, continuing his tactics of daring, he was hid in the town itself?

The group broke up. The gendarmes with the dogs began to comb the road between Sintzi and Blasco. They did not believe their man could have doubled back again to Sintzi. They had finished for the time with that village, and so they only sent one man back there – to tell the one who would by now have arrested Yovan Matitch that Yovan Matitch could go free.

The peasants, now full of praises for the dogs (which had, in their eyes, taken the plague of the gendarmes out of their village) rode off home. Only Marko Lentchitch, seething under the insult he felt he had borne, and under the taunt that Artanovitch was evidently a better man than he, rode on with the baffled patrol along the Blasco road under the hot afternoon sun.

His persistence impressed itself on Radovan. Radovan disliked Marko Lentchitch, who had on one memorable occasion referred to him publicly as that lah-de-dah young fellah Miloutinovitch. Radovan refused to believe it was merely because Lentchitch wanted to wipe out an insult that he followed the gendarmes. He himself did not understand insults and wiping them out. He was disappointed at not seeing Lentchitch proved the *yatak*. He could no longer

believe it possible that he had made a mistake in his winy words the night before. Artanovitch was in Sintzi, he was now ready to swear, and in Sintzi he was in Lentchitch's house. The conviction grew in strength.

VII

WHEN, aghast at finding she had placed herself to sob against the very wall that hid Artanovitch, Militza rushed out of the house, she found her grandmother peeling potatoes at the table in the courtyard, in the cool shade of the house wall. She rushed past her, would have run to the orchard to be away from them all there, but the old woman stopped her.

'Militza dear,' she called softly.

Militza turned her tear-wet face to the old woman.

'Come here, quickly!' her grandmother ordered her; and the tone and the dazed state she was in brought her to the table like a small erring but obedient child.

'Don't be a little fool, Militza, dear,' the old woman said, 'can't you hear them? The gendarmerie'll be here in a trice with their dogs a-nosing about the house, and 'twon't do for you to be in that sort of a state, it won't!'

The drums of Militza's ears were suddenly opened, as if a watery film on them cracked. The world burst again into its daily clamour, birds and dogs and rustling wind and the wheels of carts down on the highroad – but above it all and above the muffled thudding of horsemen galloping in waves of wind came a stranger sound, the baying of bloodhounds.

Then the world went blank again, span round in a crimson blackness.

Among those that rode, likely to search their house (if those dogs caught the scent over the courtyard) was Radovan, with his beady, suspicious, proprietary eyes.

Out of the half swoon of alarm that seized her she drew herself, by an effort, to sanity. Gone was recent imperious Militza who would never have asked her grandmother a thing.

'What shall I do, granny?' she asked, in a humble, husky voice.

'You go indoors, dearie,' her grandmother said, 'and be about your ordinary doing, and wipe the tears from your eyes, and don't you worry. Your granny'll show them round the house if they want.'

. . . . . .

Mechanically Militza swept a floor, mechanically took dust from the shelves in the room and the copper dishes and the plates that were on them, while the hounds and the patrol came on, and the hounds lost scent in the courtyard that she had swept and watered, and Zhivko and Radovan were arrested, and the man sent for Yovan Matitch. Her knees grew weaker every minute under her. And then, when the imminent danger had finally brought to her cheeks the flush of everyday life, and made her brace herself to bear any questioning and quizzing look, she heard the hounds give voice again and the whole cavalcade was gone.

She went out to her grandmother; the old woman was peeling potatoes. She sat down opposite her, stretched out her hands in front of her on the table, and stared at her.

'Is it all over?' she asked, 'is everything all right?'

'Why, of course, lassie,' the old woman croaked. She stretched out a bony hand, an arm like two sticks wrapped in skin, and she patted Militza's folded nervous hands. 'Don't you fear, they won't suspect your father of having him. But Radovan was riled they suspected your father and him together. How he eyed them dogs, too, when they were here in the yard a-sniffing about. I thought he might ha' shot 'em, I did.'

'They suspected father, too?'

'Why, no, girl, of course not. They naturally suspected while the scent seemed to lead here, and they suspected

Radovan because he was here last night. But how his eyes glared round!'

'Round what, Granny?'

'Round them all; and the yard and the orchard, of course.'

'He saw nothing?'

'What could he see?'

'But he did not suspect. . . ?'

'Tut-tut, girl, what could he. . . ?'

'But his eyes, his eyes; they always. . . .'

'Nonsense, girl, nonsense; keep a still tongue and he need never know. . . .'

And he need never know. Militza turned her head and looked about the deserted yard, followed the pattern of the shadowed leaves on the orchard fence before her; her realm of freedom and mastery; and then – he need never know. From there she walked, in thought, down a stifling narrow corridor between immense walls into a prison in which all that kept her barred in was Radovan's owning, patronizing, suspicious eyes, eyes that held her, his lawful wife, like a small cowed pet on the latest kind of pocket leash.

Alas, her thoughts slipped all too easily to another prison! The prison that was a refuge for two burning bloodshot eyes in whose light was no hint of battening on the morrow, no promise of a lurking reckoning, nought that she had been able to see but a sort of breathless plunging into whatever the moment could offer of delight.

. . . . . .

'But he?' she asked.

'He? Oh, he . . .' the old woman said. 'He'll be gone to-morrow or the next day, maybe. Then it won't be for us to fret!'

They went on, the two women, the old and the young, with their slow primitive cooking; and a boy came up from the

village with a word from Zhivko that he would eat down in the village, with the Miloutinovitches and others of their kind. The women sat to eat alone. They sat at the courtyard table, and ate without ceremony, hungrily mouthing great spoonfuls of the stew that stood in its pot on the table between them. The old woman drank a little plum brandy. She made Militza drink some wine although Militza usually drank nothing. It would 'hearten her,' she vowed.

And, indeed, the pleasant pressure of food and the warmth of the wine steadily changed Militza's appearance. The pallor that came from broken sleeping and anxiety and weeping changed to a gentle and pleasing flush. The early stages of wine have a delight and charm that is peculiarly their own, for to the glow of health is added, to spice it, a certain abandon, which rarely passes to real license and is in itself a pleasing state of blissful promise and dream.

It was nearly three o'clock when the two women, the old and the young, finished their leisurely coffee brewing and supping. The harsh mid-day heat had just begun to go; the air was merely lavishly warm, and that of a different warmth from the invigorating heat of forenoon. Then the objects of the world still have the night chill lurking in them. The sun's heat is sharp, but from walls and under trees and waggons a lingering fresh chillness of the previous night strikes out with a refreshing caress. In the old gold of afternoon, however, it is the air alone that can blow freshly, for from every object heat that is full and ripe is wafted. The mind grows to luxury.

Militza's thoughts hovered persistently round that refuge where *he* lay. Wrapt in a sun mist she passed her fingers through his unkempt hair, pressed her cool palms on his beautiful bloodshot eyes, led him out to freedom regained.

But. . . .

Again the sound of the tax-collector and Radovan and her father, cold-bloodedly discussing his death, and with their voices the thud of the gendarmerie horses seemed all together to beat on her ears.

She remembered then that Artanovitch must be hungry, must be thirsty; his water, if any left, long gone tepid; the air in that pent-up secret closet, if he had used the pot put there, long foul and unbearable, with no evening breeze to relieve his suffocating lungs. She was horrified that she had not thought of it before, and her horror raised her for a moment from her lethargy.

'Is there time?' she suddenly asked the old woman.

'Time for what?' the old woman asked, sharply.

'Time to take him food, do his room?'

'The Lord bless you, girl, and why should you be doing his burrow? He's enough food, anyway.'

'But he is our guest; hospitality?'

'He's not our guest, dearie, we're his victims.'

'How. . . ?'

'All in good time, all in good time you'll learn.'

'Then I can't go in to him? He must be suffocated to death in there?'

'Used to worse.'

'But still, a man like that; Artanovitch, Artanovitch. They say he never wore a shirt once without washing.'

'Ha!' was all her grandmother said, 'hm!'

Militza then felt that of the two at least of them she was still master, in spite of her father's change of attitude.

'Come with me, Granny,' she said.

And the old woman actually followed her into Zhivko's room to the secret door behind the stove.

'He must be stifled in there, we must open this a while.'

'Better him be stifled,' was the old woman's answer, 'than risk his head and ours too – not I!'

'You will help me; you can keep watch at the window of the big room, if anyone comes; or I'll do it all by myself. He's our guest, whatever he is,' cried Militza.

She became frantic in her defence of the duties of hospitality; asked her old grandmother (who had risked her freedom thus before she, the hussy, was born) if she was afraid, taunted her with it. She seemed, too, in one moment, to have convinced herself that it was merely that – her sense of responsibility for their house's hospitality – impelled her to bring Artanovitch air and fresh water thus, in broad daylight, – instead of, as the old woman had always done at dead of night.

But at the back of her mind lurked another thought nearer to the truth of her heart – *shall such a man day in day out never see the open sky, the sun?*

. . . . . .

Artanovitch could hear them – hear most of what they said through the wall.

Since the sobbing had disappeared he had been sitting on the ground, his knees drawn up and his chin on them, lost in thought, staring into a future which had become a nightmare of four rough, crushing walls, stifling and putrid air, and a fast longing, which came in spite of himself, to be a free man to walk out in broad daylight and woo, to make her his wife and to rear a family – such a clean lass, the like of which he never saw now, as Militza. Her weeping was a ferment in his pent-up mind, and a dark mass of doubts and hopes seethed in it angrily; for though the most likely thing of all was that those tears were a common play of hers now adolescence had passed its culminating point, and the

humours of lust in her were morbidly inflaming her maiden heart – and it was as likely, too, that she wept because of anguish at the thought of the danger in which her house now stood because of him – he dwelt lingeringly on all the reasons for tears other than that impossible reason which would be congenial to him – that she was sobbing for him.

The conversation through the wall emboldened him, and when he heard the stove begin to scrape on its base, and saw a narrow crack in the wall widen by little jerks as weak woman's arms pushed the mass of brick, he sprang to his feet, smiling – though with revolver in his hand, cautious too.

It was nearly four o'clock; and in his cell of refuge the unreflecting walls carried little enough light. He was already at that hour in deep gloom. He saw those in the room before they could more than distinguish the mere bulk of him in the darkness. There they were, the old woman and the girl, the girl a good head above the bent and shrivelled face, and on the floor, ready beside them, stood a pitcher of water and food for him.

The old woman's face was suspicious and ominous, he could see that; and set, too, her lips, fiercely. Yet this was a good sign of the same thing as the flush on Militza's cheeks. Her eyes were large and swimming. The old woman's eyes were scornful; Militza's darted up and down the length of him to feel him and to see him in the dark. It was she who had insisted, then, on coming to him.

Then he saw her turn.

'Go,' she said to her grandmother, 'look by the window, in case anyone comes!'

The old woman went.

'The door is locked,' she said to him, 'come and stretch your legs. I must make your bed.'

She herself was startled by the firmness of her voice. Her eyes were still fastened on him, evidently unable to distinguish well in the gloom of the hollow wall.

He drank in the sight; the alluring, fully developed girl, perhaps breathing a little hard, but otherwise calm, standing bent forward, peering into the gloom as if to draw him out of it. The old woman went away. He came slowly forward.

Suddenly he saw Militza start, the whites of her eyes flash out, a flush come into her cheeks. But in a moment she had mastered herself.

He was standing in the room beside her, stretched to his full lithe six feet.

He was not fully at his ease; easy jocular banter, such as he would in any other case of the sort have used, stuck on his lips. He became conscious, too, of his unkemptness.

'Can I wash?' he asked.

He had not seen water to wash for two days. In the excitement of the night nobody had thought of what was not, in any case, of great importance to them; but Nicholas, as he stood before the girl, and for the moment cursed himself for not being free to take her in marriage (how could he carry her to a bandit's sullen end?) became again the old dandy, the one-time townsman.

She had, he then saw, already put water out ready for him. He took soap and plied it freely, vigorously, while she put his noisome little hiding-place in order, and a fresh evening draught blew through it. He drew a razor from his pocket and the harsh rasp of tough, inch-long beard coming off made a duet with the thumping of pillows.

Together with the dirt the fierce physical desire he had been feeling, that had grown foul in that acrid air of his refuge, partly left him, and he ceased to be merely a bandit, a common fugitive, for whom, during three years, with the

exception of lecherous grasping Juliana, women had been mere cows, peasant wenches in inns or on farms who had suffered his rut with as little concern and as little evident pleasure as any farmyard hen her cock. He was, for the time, even awed. Militza's unhesitating management of him and care for him was having the almost soporific effect of service in church, which he had not known for years. He was pinioned by dreams of something immaculate, something whole, something nothing mean or unclean had ever changed.

. . . . . .

When, eventually, after nearly twenty minutes, Militza stood before him and said quietly, 'Nicholas, I am sorry, you must get back; any moment father may come, and Radovan Miloutinovitch with him!' he was tongue-tied. He stood rooted to the ground like any village boob, though he looked no boob.

The prow of his keen chin now stood out in a beautiful curve from his bony, bronzed and shining cheeks; the outline of his long moustaches was clear; the hair on his head was combed into a glossy sea of auburn; in the unfastened shirt his body tapered swiftly to a lithe sinewy-ribboned neck, and he stood with his head a little tossed back.

He was like a gnarled lithe elm facing a puny hurricane; and yet, in the same moment, he was a blushing, green boy, powerless either to move or to speak.

Militza, he now saw, had developed by more than three years since last he had seen her, and though the cheeks were virginally round and soft that flesh seemed but a ghostly form that but half-concealed a finer, firmer underline. He did not know how much that new firmness, which came of a momentary spiritual firmness, was fruit of the last few hours.

'Come, come,' she said again, 'don't be foolish; you must get back. I can't close the wall as quickly and easily as father.'

There was admiration of him in her eyes, and Artanovitch read it there. Her eyes passed up and down the stalwart figure before her, who came but last night and would be gone in a few hours, carrying his life in his hands. And his life must, nevertheless, be as dear to him as fop Radovan Miloutinovitch's was to him. More dear, indeed, she would have thought, for such a life, with a body like that to have it in, gained in its sweet value by proportion to its very precariousness. At last – it was only after a couple of immobile minutes, but these minutes were an hour, spontaneous, of mutual admiration – he stirred, turned, to return to hiding.

At the very door, as he was stooping to enter, he stopped and turned back.

She was standing behind him with warm eyes, waiting – to be ready to close the wall the moment he was inside. He stood upright again. He put his hands on her shoulders. 'Thank you, Militza, lass,' he said. Their eyes, molten in fire, welded together. He felt the flesh and sinew of her shoulders press firmly up against the crook of his fingers, and a shudder passed over them both.

He turned away and dived into the hole.

Not a word more was said between them. He disappeared into the now murky closet.

Furiously she bent to the false door, wrenching it into position. Then, with a goose wing, she gently brushed the dust and flakes of plaster round the rough crack to a natural state. Her cheeks were burning now, but she felt as if a double strength was given to her. Only she shrank from admitting to herself what was happening within her.

VIII

WHEN Militza's father, accompanied as usual by his 'son-in-law' (as he had suddenly begun to call him) came up in the evening at about six, all sense of reckoning left her. What she had done that afternoon, ended by the strange, hasty, passionate kiss – of sympathy, was it? – that her grandmother had given her when she went to her at the window to tell her Artanovitch was safely hidden away again, was a thing of another world. She was buffeted to and fro as if all her feelings were gusts of harsh wind from every quarter of heaven, she amid the storm. She looked on Radovan with fear and stirred uneasily as she felt his proprietary searching eyes upon herself.

Her father continued to order her about. He and Radovan had been drinking, and she could see that, in the excitement of the day's work, and particularly in her father's relief that the danger of Artanovitch's discovery was over, they had been expanding, opening their souls, and there had been talk of her. She knew her father was tired of her whimsical shilly-shallying. Now it seemed that as head of his family he was going to have everything done exactly as he pleased.

He saw her confusion and he flayed her with jeering orders to *wait better on her man.* She began to gloat over what she had done with Artanovitch, and her cot became a secret refuge in which she found the strength to be humble, to be Radovan's affianced, in name if never to be in deed.

At last Radovan went.

'See our honoured guest to the gate, girl!' Zhivko ordered. 'A-hah! young blood runs hot, does it? Radovan, my boy, we must not keep the filly waiting much longer, eh? A-hah!'

He had noticed how her cheeks flamed when he told her

to see Radovan to the courtyard gate. He laughed loudly, her father did, now that he saw that scarlet turn further to a crimson. In his wine-warmed brain it made his daughter seem swollen with desire.

She went, as she was bid, with Radovan to the courtyard gate, unfastened the huge wood bolt and drew it back and swung open one wing of the great doors for him.

He turned to say good-night.

His quizzing beady eyes ran up and down her, nasty small animals from which instinctively she shrank. In Radovan's lust there was mixed a complacent smirk which seemed grotesque against the bandit's healthy hunger. And again she realized the comparison she was making, and where she was in her thoughts of Bloody Nicholas; and her blood beat so harshly in her hot temples that the world was filmed over with a haze and she felt that she was swaying to fall.

Radovan drank in her fierce confusion, and smugly put it to his own account. At last, he thought, she was ready to reveal her heart; would of her own open will gladly accept him as her man; not merely walk with him before the altar at her father's bidding.

'Well,' he asked, 'then when shall it be? Soon?'

Her confusion mounted still more. To her innocent shame at her longing for Artanovitch was added her resentment of fop Radovan's assumption of rights over her. She hung her head.

It was the cue he had waited for. Radovan became the romantic lover. He could see himself, with his smartly trimmed moustaches, his brilliant black-polished sandals, his magnificent fob bought at Pantelin the jeweller's in Blasco, the most expensive shop and its heaviest fob; like a hero on the Blasco stage, say in the Bartered Bride; and he

took Militza's hand condescendingly in his, and because he was very up-to-date, kissed it most chivalrously.

'After the harvest,' he suggested, 'there'll be animals enough fattened for slaughter for the wedding guests. Will you? Will you?'

He pretended, as he had often pretended before, that her consent in this marriage that neither needed or cared for in their hearts was the key of it all for him.

She shook her head, slowly. Then she spoke.

'No,' she said, 'no!'

As she shook her head she looked up at him, and she could see that he could not believe his ears, and his round, full, clean-shaved cheeks were waxen blank round his wide-open eyes.

Once more he asked her, and once more she shook her head, and answered no. And once more she could see that he was so astounded that he could only ascribe her refusal to not having understood.

Or—did he—did he—suspect something? His little black eyes were searching her scarlet face.

And then she shook like an aspen in her guilt, and once again a tidal wave of blood beat in her cheeks and overwhelmed her. Every inch of her skin was pricking hot, for of her sense of inward guilt was born fear that by provoking Radovan she would endanger *him*.

She was a hunted sheep for which there was no escape. Both he, Artanovitch, and she herself were hunted. He was hunted and she was hunted, and before she could give herself proper count of what she did in the blind feeling that by so doing she was protecting *him* she gave Radovan the 'yes' that he pretended he wanted.

. . . . . .

When she went inside she had to face her father. He

would have learned of what she had done that afternoon, and would be angry with her. So she thought, but when she went in he did not say a word, nor seem to be out of humour. She wondered if he had been told by her grandmother, and she still feared he had not, but that the storm of rage was still to come; and she waited anxiously. After half an hour, though, she blessed the old woman for whatever she had done to make her behaviour seem to be the natural thing he evidently considered it, for after half an hour Zhivko announced that, while he had a word with Artanovitch, Militza might give him more water, 'or anything you forgot this afternoon.' *He knew and he did not mind!*

He barred the outer doors, himself adjusted the blind at the window and turned the lamp low, and went in and opened the hollow wall.

Her father and Artanovitch sat, close together, in her father's room, and in a low voice her father told him of all that had happened in the day – and how by the use of his sandals the false scent had been laid. Artanovitch clapped her father on the back and shook his hand vigorously.

'Bravo!' he said, 'you're a man!'

Zhivko smiled under the compliment, was flattered. But yet Militza, who was in the room at the moment, did not miss his uneasy start at Nicholas's hand, and she began to watch her father, because on her father depended so much. On her father depended that miracle, a man's life; Bloody Nicholas's life.

Nicholas himself, spruce, showed to his best, and most of all the clean jaw that was thrust forward, cleaving the world before him, stood out; and, too, not to be one swift second forgotten, the piercing eyes, which twenty-four hours of dim light had gone a long way to heal of inflammation.

But as she came and went, bringing fresh water and a

dozen other small comforts – some ready-made coffee and a little spirit lamp to heat it on when he wanted, a comb, a towel – she could catch little of what they said. But this mattered little, for every time she entered the room, whether he were at the moment listening or speaking, Nicholas looked up, calmly and purposefully, at her, and she steadily returned the look with eyes hotter than his.

So carried away was she by the excitement of it all that she hardly gave a thought to how her father might look at it. Once she had seen that her visit to Artanovitch that afternoon had not disturbed or angered him she cared not very much how peculiar her behaviour might seem. All that was happening was, somehow, outside the current of her daily life.

But her father, once he had finally made up his mind to give her in marriage to Radovan, was quite indifferent to her whims of heart, indifferent to where her eyes might rove.

No doubt too Zhivko looked on Artanovitch, who would be gone in a few hours from their house, as a man already lost to this world. One man, thus hard pursued, could not run long before the gendarmerie.

The conversation between the two men went on. She heard money more and more often mentioned, but now they whispered so that even when she was in the room she could catch no more than a haggle about some sum of money, somebody's coming from Blasco or going to Blasco; and then, when the bargain (as it appeared to be), was settled, and they allowed their voices to escape from the constraint of a complete whisper, something about his, Artanovitch's, going to-morrow night. She did not dare believe it was true. She had imagined Artanovitch would have to be with them weeks before the countryside was safe enough for him to escape. These last words filled her with dismay.

'Is our guest then to go to-morrow?' she asked sharply and

boldly. She spoke in her old managing tone, and her father turned furiously on her, his brows contracted, as if he could hardly believe his ears.

'What's that?' he snapped.

'Can our guest really be going to-morrow?' she asked again.

'Hold your tongue, girl, and you'll find out when it's time?' he snarled at her.

But Artanovitch, smiling whimsically and yet a little bitterly, and burning her with his eyes, nodded 'yes!'

'But the country won't be clear enough, Father. We can't let him go. It won't be safe!'

'We know a man's business best,' said her father, though a little more kindly, as if he felt Artanovitch's condemnation of the way he treated her. There was a sneer on Artanovitch's lips.

He got up. Artanovitch got up too, understanding that he was expected to go back to his hiding. As he stood exchanging a last few whispered words with her father Militza slipped into the little hole with a pitcher of water, and Artanovitch crept through into it before she had time to get out, had she even wanted to.

Neither of the two men had seen her slip inside – and Artanovitch started in amazement when he caught sight of her supple outline in the deep gloom, the whiteness of her shirt marking the form of her bosom in the faint light that filtered through the low doorway from the lamp in the room.

He did not say a word, but stood aside for her to get out. It was all done so quickly that he had not time to think. She called out loudly, for her father to hear, 'Don't shut me in too, Father,' and laughed, a little nervously. 'I'd just brought some water.'

Zhivko swore morosely. 'Hurry along, you little fool!' he cried, and while he was swearing and shouting that, out

Militza slipped towards the low entrance hole. But as she bent to get out, for a brief instant she seized Artanovitch's hand in hers and squeezed it to her full, hot, dry lips.

Artanovitch felt the hard wall of her teeth through her burning lips against the back of his hand in that short instant, so fiercely did she imprint the kiss. Then, before he could in any way respond, she was gone, and Zhivko was moving back the stove, growling at her to help.

The wall closed.

'Good night, Father,' Artanovitch could hear her firm voice through the wall. He could not see the swarthy calculating and suspicious look with which her father's hard eyes swept her in reply.

IX

THE next day was a drawn-out agony of waiting for a moment to see Artanovitch; a day lived through under Radovan's limpet eyes. Her father met Radovan in the morning and brought him to the mid-day meal. It became a day of forced jollification and discussion of dowries and sly quips and jests about the bridal bed – all with *him* concealed in the wall of the house, a few yards from where they sat. Militza, in fever all the night, had risen with the whole world light round her burning head. She moved through the day with bright eyes that Radovan interpreted to his own self-satisfaction; but that made her father cautious and suspicious. Had the old woman guessed? Had she told?

In the afternoon, at five o'clock, they still sat at the table in the courtyard, drinking and joking and leering; and Militza sat with them, to go at their orders every few minutes to bring more wine. The old woman was there too, her wrinkled leathery face perpetually twisted into a kindly sort of leer, but from the overgentle way she took her arm from time to time Militza judged that she understood, and that however much she disapproved she in her understanding would be kind.

Affianced, in her best, she sat there, while in their lewd imagination the two celebrating men saw her body led to the humdrum pleasures and protracted duties of the marriage bed. Hopelessly she forced her buoyant thought away from that other love she knew Artanovitch could give – and for which Artanovitch would pay, not in material coin, but in the gamble of his own life, as long as head was clear and aim was sure – as long as he were worthy of a fine woman's love.

And was he to leave that very night? Again, again she

puzzled over the hushed bargaining of the evening before. Before another night fell would he then be gone? She trembled to think. She only felt certain how her father was no real friend to Artanovitch, but she saw the power that lay behind this man, even while he was at the very mercy of Zhivko Trifounatz, a refugee trapped in a wall.

As dusk fell she observed her father grow a little uneasy, turned his head to one side and another. He anxiously watched the last dregs of the flask of wine before them disappear, and when Militza rose mechanically once again to replenish it he stopped her.

'Enough!' he cried, 'evening calls for greater merriment than this. Come along, Radovan, my lad!'

'Where?' Radovan asked.

He was heavy with wine, and would fain have sat on there, slowly flooding his belly, in a dull state fluctuating between a drinker's cloudy bliss and acrid despondency.

'Down to the village,' cried Zhivko, 'we must be a merry company to-night, and then, – where the wind blows us all!'

He went inside to get the belt which he had thrown off during the afternoon; Radovan rose sluggishly, and began to fasten on his own, which lay beside him. The old woman followed her son indoors.

'My stick!' Radovan cried.

He had left his stick in the house, and Militza went humbly in to fetch it. In the great room she found her father and grandmother earnestly, and rapidly, whispering. The stick stood by the kitchen door, and she took it out to Radovan. He wanted to kiss her, but, with instinctive cunning she was coy, slipped silently away and ran, not into the house, but into the orchard. That conversation in there might concern him, and automatically she did her part as *yatak's* daughter.

When her father came out Militza was standing, bright-eyed and breathing hard, at one end of the table. Radovan, scarlet and panting, had collapsed on the bench, defeated in the chase among the apple trees in the orchard and then round and round the table.

Her father laughed raucously.

'Ha, ha, lass,' he yelled at her, 'been trying to get a little earnest already, has he? A-hah, you young folk! Bide a while.'

He took Radovan by the arm and jerked him up.

'Come along, son-in-law,' he said, 'steady on, steady on, have to find something to keep you quiet a while if you're so impatient at my girl. It's a long time to September, and we don't want Militza Trifounatz going before the priest with a round belly, eh?'

He laughed loudly at his sally, and Radovan, ridiculously discomfited, joined him. Arm in arm they steered through the gate and down the road to the village.

'Ugh!' Militza cried to her grandmother, who had watched it all with dull sphinx-like eyes, 'how disgusting they both are!'

'Men are all alike,' her grandmother answered. There was resignation long petrified in her voice.

'Not all,' Militza muttered.

The old woman watched her closely.

''Tis not only *marrying* in haste repents at leisure,' she observed. Then, before Militza had time to ask what she meant, she said, 'Listen – there's things doing to-night. We expect a man from Blasco. We don't want more than need to know of his coming; and then we let Artanovitch go on his way. He's passing to Darnari to-night, if the other man comes with the stuff. That's all right, my girl, that's as it has to be,' she added, when she saw how Militza caught her breath.

'Zhivko's taking Radovan and the others off in the other direction. Maybe they'll go down to Blasco to-night.'

She tittered significantly. Militza thought bitterly of Radovan's complacent love, and how, for all his protestations to her, he would spend the night.

'And Artanovitch will be safe enough going the other way,' the old woman said.

The two women went indoors and sat at the table in the big room. Militza, seeing her grandmother knew what was in her heart, did not dare make any allusion to Artanovitch, though her heart beat heavily; and the old woman presumably understood her silence, and left it at that. Her slow old tongue hovered fitfully round the usual pious platitudes and tales of what was once in the village when 'Duke' Sima (a famous brigand) was mayor.

But before long there was a sound of steps approaching the house, and a man entered the courtyard; and in a moment was rapping sharply on the door.

'Run along, Militza,' said the old woman, 'and open to him!'

With some misgiving Militza opened the door. She was surprised to see at so late an hour a strange townsman, dressed in ordinary European fashion, a smart cane hooked over his arm. It was a youngish man, of an indefinite age between thirty and forty; slim, a grey felt hat on his head. He smiled at her a trifle uneasily, she thought, and swept the hat from his head.

'Have I the honour,' he asked, 'of speaking to Miss Trifounatz?'

The unusual mode of address took her aback (for though the Trifounatzes were the nearest peasants could be to being townsfolk she was not used to being called *Miss*.) And though she knew some stranger in connection with *him* was

expected she could not understand how this dandyish fellow could be he.

'I am Militza Trifounatz,' she said.

'Your father is at home?'

'No, my father is out. I am alone with my grandmother.'

Then, before she had time to ask him what his business was, his face lost its worried look and sank to an easy smile.

'Excellent,' he said, and again swept off his hat.

But this time he did not replace it, but kept it in his hand and stepped in through the doorway. Militza made no effort to stop him. She followed him, her heart beating fast, but half-way to the room through the kitchen he stopped and turned round and asked, 'Door locked?' Then, when he saw by her vacant eyes that it was not he added, 'lock and bar it, I beg you, and quickly!' When she came back her grandmother and the young man were both sitting at the table talking quietly.

'I have been asked to execute a delicate commission,' the young man said, with a brilliant smile.

'Now I wonder if we could guess what that might be, young man!' the old woman said, with unusual playfulness.

'Maybe, maybe,' the young man said, 'especially if it happened to concern a sum of money.'

'My son,' the old woman asked, 'has sold a cow, maybe?'

'Not a cow, but a good breeding bull, I think, eh? I've to make a little payment on the account. I'd like to get it over quickly, I'm a bit anxious about getting back, as it's late.'

'And I don't doubt you are,' Militza's grandmother went on, riddling, 'with the people there is a these days a-lurking on the roads. A glass of *rakia?*'

'Well. . . .'

'Of course. Militza, darling, bring the *rakia.*'

'And did you meet many folk on the road,' the old woman went on, 'as you rode in?'

'Very quiet it was, old lady,' the visitor replied, 'except that I did see a fair sprinkling of what I think were your Sintzi menfolk coming into Blasco a little before I left the town, but I can't say I noticed Mr Trifounatz among them, though it is true it was already dark then. They were pretty merry. . . .'

'Now I wonder if Zhivko was with them. He usually goes down when they all go. Do you, by any chance, know Radovan Miloutinovitch?'

'Brother to the mayor of your village? Indeed I do – he banks in our bank. He was among 'em.'

'Then Zhivko'd be there too, he would.'

As Militza brought the *rakia* she wondered what the purpose of this elaborate conversation could be, while she suspected that this young man had met Zhivko in Blasco. She began to prepare coffee too for the visitor, but he protested – he could not wait. If they would permit. If they would allow him to be so abrupt.

He and the old woman tossed off a tot of plum spirits each; then another one. He questioned her with his eyes – nodded towards Militza. The old woman nodded in reply. Militza sat as if in a dream, herself not knowing what her thoughts were. Was the riddle of the fine bull sold connected with *him?* Or was it merely a blind in case stranger ears were listening? Was her father selling *him* to the police? Yet were that so, would the young man have come so mysteriously – be behaving so mysteriously as she now saw he was? Was her father then paid to protect Artanovitch? Had *he* to buy his men?

Meanwhile the visitor again tried all doors, peered through the windows, lowered the flame of the lamp. And then, in a jiffy, he slipped off his town coat and waistcoat. He turned

aside from Militza, unfastened his shirt at the chest, slipped his hand inside, fumbling – and in a minute he pulled out a broad thin wash-leather belt that crackled very slightly. He laid it on the table in front of the old woman and rapidly pulled on his clothes again. Militza watched her greedily snatch at the belt. Her wrinkled, pouched jaws were violently agitated and she bent over the belt like a scavenger bird over a puffed and swollen corpse. She drew wads of notes, all large denomination notes, from it, and with fingers that seemed strangely practised for an old peasant woman began flicking up the corners of the notes in each wad, eyeing the numbers in the corner, feeling the paper, examining the watermark, counting.

Except for her harsh, short breathing, there was silence in the room and beyond. The visitor sat down again while the money was being counted. The oil-lamp, turned low, gave a miserable yellowish light. Militza herself could not breathe properly while she saw that money counted – money exactly twice the sum, so far as she could tell, of the price on Artanovitch's head.

The visitor broke the silence. 'Your fingers are nimbler than mine at that job,' he said.

The old woman laughed raucously. 'My fingers counted notes afore that bank of yours in Blasco was ever thought of. We were the village bankers in those days, and I was the bank clerk.'

'And an excellent one too,' the Blasco man – a bank clerk? – proffered, with an easy smile and bow.

The old woman looked sharply at him.

'And a little less afraid to risk my skin too,' she retorted.

'That,' said the young man, 'is the privilege of the ladies – to be daring.'

'Somebody, 'tis clear, has to be,' the old woman jeered.

'But courage, and that's not quite the same thing, is wanted too, I think?'

The young man was on his dignity. He rose to go, and, going, turned to have the last word.

'Of course,' the old woman said, 'that's what I was saying!'

Militza smiled, in spite of herself, but the young man seemed to have had enough. Courage, to him, obviously did not mean lack of caution, and the sooner and quieter he was away from that house the better for his skin.

'I must be going,' he said, 'can I have the receipt?'

Militza saw her grandmother fumble in her bosom, and at last draw out a piece of rag. She unknotted one end of it and drew a small object therefrom, and handed it to the young man. Before he put it in his pocket he held it a moment on his palm close to his eyes, and Militza saw that it was a large signet ring with a green stone, a ring such as she remembered seeing, remembered seeing, but could not. . . .

The bank clerk slipped the ring into his pocket and bid them good-night while she was still trying to think why the ring should strike her, and why a ring should serve as receipt. Her grandmother took the man to the door, and on the way to the courtyard door the argument about courage evidently revived. She heard the young man saying, in his bantering town mincing way, 'The trouble with you ladies is that your courage is not constant enough to be. . . .' and her grandmother indignantly replying.

And then she remembered. Of course, the ring was his, was Artanovitch's. She now saw and admitted to herself what she had hated before to admit – that the friendship and the refuge of her father's roof was bought. That was what being a *yatak* meant. She set her full lips in a firm tight line, and when her grandmother came in she would not speak one word.

The old woman, her grandmother, curse her, divined her thoughts. At last the cheap alarm clock on the shelf struck nine.

'Time Artanovitch was going,' the old woman said.

The first words these were to be spoken since the blood money bringer had left the house.

'It will be a relief to have him gone.'

'And to spend his hard-won money?' Militza asked, and took no pains to hide her sneer.

'Tut-tut, girl, hard-won indeed. A lazy life, a highwayman's, and you talk of hard-won.'

'And you nor father feel no scruples about a highwayman's money?'

'Could we then have him here for nothing?'

'But friendship?'

Her grandmother looked hard at her.

'There can be no friendship of any kind for a man of Artanovitch's life,' she said, deliberately and firmly, 'no friendship at all. Never, never forget that, my girl. A bandit, whose hand is against the law and everybody's hand against his knows only the love that money buys; only the love that money buys.'

The old woman's filmy eyes flittered to and fro over Militza's blank and sullen features.

'Could that hole in the wall not just as well be a trap?' the old woman asked. 'Are we so rich that we can afford to risk our lives and let all that money go? That is why Artanovitch has to outbid the police? See? Come, now, we must see him on his way.'

And she went into her son's room and stood by the stove. She tapped on the wall – the signal to be ready.

'Come!' she cried to Militza. 'My old bones can't move this alone.'

Militza moved sluggishly, like a girl drugged. So little had she seen Artanovitch, so little, she realized now, did she know him as he now was, that in her weariness her overstrained heart faltered. She doubted. Before she knew where she was she had become the cowlike woman that the banal young Blasco clerk at the door imagined they all were. Her courage was not constant. She would not, as she would have liked, be able to throw everything up, and, as Artanovitch appeared in the low doorway from his refuge, snatch the price for his freedom from where her grandmother had temporarily hid it in her bosom, and throw herself at Artanovitch's feet, to follow him to death.

No.

With craven heart she helped her grandmother move back the stove, and then they stood back, the old and the young, side by side, to make room for Artanovitch to pass.

He appeared in the opening, bent to pass into the outer room. His eyes flashed on Militza, but she, in shameful confusion more now at her own weakness and cowardice than at the love that filled her heart, looked a second at him feebly and then let fall her eyes. She was conscious of her grandmother's filmy glance fixed on her. Out of the corners of her eyes she could see that furrowed face twitching to and fro from Artanovitch to her and back again and again.

'Well?' he asked, smiling uncertainly.

He had heard the arrival and departure of his secret agent from the Blasco bank. The old woman merely shrugged her shoulders, as if impatient to be quit of the whole business.

It was more like a prisoner leaving his cell, who is, still, until through the gates and away from the shadow of its walls, more a number than a man; with less human dignity left than any slave of antiquity. He strode in front of the women, the old and the young, like a released prisoner before

two warders, and into the large room; and then he stopped, and turned, looking back towards them.

She had not moved, but the old woman had turned so as to face fully towards him.

'Well, speak then, old lady,' he called raspingly, after many lengthy seconds waiting, 'or have you lost your tongue?'

'There's nothing to say,' she said; then stepped into the room.

She, too, was pained at heart by what was happening. Her yellowish face, from the black cowl of her kerchief, peered up at the magnificent shoulders and head of Bloody Nicholas. But she had to do her duty.

'Well, come along, then ; hurry up; it's all in order; you know the customs as well as I do. If you're caught we know naught on't. We're in the inner room and know naught! *Zbogom!*' she added.

The word, short and sharp, tossed at him, was but an everyday *good-bye* that breathed impatience and contempt. Artanovitch looked steadily back at Militza, standing still by the displaced stove in the inner room. She had turned, and, drawn to her full stature, was drinking in the sight of him.

Well the old woman understood what was afoot. Out of the corner of her eye she watched Militza. She saw Militza take a sudden step forward. Once again the girl was bracing herself to resolution.

She turned her head towards her, and, in a voice full of scorn, old woman to young girl, cried:

'And you, Militza, you stay where you are, d'y' hear?'

Militza stopped short, her impulse defeated. Her grandmother's determined, assured intervention for the moment daunted her. She was not yet used, when it came to something important, to being her own mistress.

When she hesitated Artanovitch lowered his eyes, and

before she could move again, without a word, strode to the door outside and into the night. The old woman's leather cheeks, beneath the black kerchief, twisted into a wry smile that might have meant sorrow, an old woman's regret, or might just as well have been exultant malice.

But this Militza did not see. Artanovitch was gone, perhaps for ever, into the outer darkness. In spite of the old woman, it was more than her young heart, still open to illusion, could bear. When he had quite gone, and only the empty doorway stood before them, with a short yelp of despair she dashed to the door. She dashed by her grandmother, and her grandmother, astounded, dismayed, could do no more than utter a weak breathless whisper.

'Militza!'

Militza rushed through the kitchen and out into the yard. In the yard, at the edge of the canopy, she stopped and listened. But there was no sound met her ear other than the rustling of the wind in the trees. The moon was up, low on the horizon and its rays, slanting over the orchard palisade, had lit the upper part of the house wall, and laid on them a gently quivering tracery of sinewy vine stems and luxurious leaves.

A twig snapped away beyond the orchard, on the side of the little stream. She ran, then, suddenly desperate, to the fence, and cried into the night a clear, piercing cry:

'*Zbo – gom!*'

Her voice dropped on the second syllable, so that on her lips the parting greeting took on again its mediæval meaning, pious and loving, –

'*God preserve you!*' she cried, and then listened, straining her ears to catch every sound.

Down the wind, from not so very far away, drifted a man's answering whistle. And Militza, dry and hot and tearless, went back into the house.

X

NOT a word did the old woman say to Militza about her conduct, nor by a look show that she was aware of what had taken place. Yet Militza knew her grandmother knew and understood. The old eyes followed her day after day, as if afraid she would take to the open country after him she loved.

But Militza had no thought of this. The rustling moon-dim night had engulfed a dream, and the dream – Artanovitch and a living self she had not before known was in her – had vanished in momentary glory. The living response that came out of the night was in the night like a bubble, iridescent, then gone, under the harsh and flashing sun. And all of him she could hear was, day by day, the empty negative news that still he was uncaptured, still apparently was a free man.

The days went by, May gathered momentum towards the burning southern June, the first harvest coming and passing. Dawn was early, the night short, the early grain fields of tawny gold. The maize, still green and succulent, had raised its leaves above a man's waist. The village toiled, and only the officials, and the old men and the traders were comparatively free – the upper clique of the little village; and among them Yovan Matitch, the tax-collector, the elder Miloutinovitch the mayor, and, of course, his brother Radovan too, who had been the first farmer in the village to assert himself and stand aside to watch others work his land. It was a costly pleasure, of course, but there was always money in the Miloutinovitch family (not only through the elder brother – there always had been) and it was worth losing a little on the farming to Radovan to be able to wear, day in day out, the smartest holiday black lacquered sandals!

Then, of course, there was Militza's own father, who hired out what land he had; a 'master' too, in his own way. He preferred dealing in cattle to tilling the land. So, in early June, while the fields echoed with the songs of the harvesters the little green before the village inn, and first Radovan's courtyard, then Zhivko's, echoed with the songs that go with wine.

But Radovan Miloutinovitch could not rest in that matter of Bloody Nicholas. His mind once at rest as to his marriage with Militza, his obnoxious energy was liberated for interference in other things. He became pigheadedly obsessed with the idea that Marko Lentchitch knew more of the Artanovitch affair than he admitted, and Zhivko naturally made little effort to discourage him in this.

And finally one morning, heated up with hatred for Marko Lentchitch, who never lost an occasion to measure him, lacquered sandals to trimmed whiskers, with a cold commiserating eye, he drove over to Blasco – and came back with one of the famous police dogs – lent him, so he said, by the same sergeant. That afternoon they fixed for Radovan's little venture into detecting. Yovan Matitch and Zhivko were wild with amusement, and out to enjoy the fun.

'Do you think,' they would ask, 'Nicholas Artanovitch is still in this village?'

'I think that swine Marko Lentchitch knows if anyone knows,' was Miloutinovitch's reply, on which they would guffaw and clap him on the back. This was all at table at the Miloutinovitch's, and the joke did not fail to warm them as, gently stirred by wine, the three of them made their way with the dog up the slope behind the village to where, Radovan said, they would pick up the trail. Zhivko and Yovan asked often enough if Radovan really thought scents lasted for ever for the nose of a police dog, and the

answer every time was the same! the guffaws every time the same!

Thus the three overfed idle men set out, for an afternoon's recreation, – to try to bring a neighbour, an honest farmer, to chains – or maybe to the stake and a firing squad. There was no doubt, either, but that Radovan Miloutinovitch was doing it in dead seriousness.

For two long hours they tramped and scampered like schoolboys over the hillside where Artanovitch's traces had gone, and they even went up to the little copse again; but though the dog did show some interest in a rabbit among the leaves in the little wood he could not be induced to follow any track at all over the open, sunbaked ground.

Opinionated Radovan was convinced the police dog (after having shown the intelligence to go near Marko Lentchitch's house on the day of the chase), would go one better when coaxed with scraps of smoked pig and maize bread. The other two were vastly amused, but of course they ended up without any bag, well on into the afternoon, at Zhivko's house, under the vines. The courtyard was covered with shrivelled fallen flowers, and the rustic canopy was studded with tight clusters of small, hard virginal grapes. Beneath them they drowned their merriment, and Radovan, perhaps less effectively – his discomfiture, in ripe old wine. The dog, left to himself, nosed about the house, made acquaintance with the old grandmother and with Militza; made himself at home with them.

. . . . . .

Militza, grown thinner, paler in these two long weeks of no news of *him*, sat indoors at embroidery all day, every day. She was there that afternoon, and 'women's affairs' in the house made her excuse to avoid Radovan, who now pawed her without restraint, if not always with his podgy hands, at least with his soiling eyes.

She welcomed the police dog in her loneliness, for her old grandmother was ever silent, and now she was affianced she had no one else to talk to. Yet she feared the dog at the same time as she welcomed it, because it was one of those that had tracked, and might have found – *him*. She caressed it, fed it, talked to it, and fed it on tit-bit scraps. And the great hound sat at her feet, its nose on her knees, its brown eyes for the moment slavishly dependent on hers.

She had only one care, to keep it from that room, in case, some scent in the wall itself lurking, it found *his* traces there. She knew well enough that after two weeks the scent could not be there; but yet in spite of her knowledge she feared and shivered in her fear, and prayed that Radovan would not come into the house. But he was content; he had no need, now their betrothal was admitted, to pursue her with lover's eyes at every minute of the day.

So thus they sat a long time, the dog and Militza, and the soft, treacherous, doggy brown eyes watched her and watched her active needle. And then, how could it be otherwise? the momentary satiety of the scraps it had got passed, and the animal began to frisk for play. It was bored. It began to gambol about the room, sniffing walls, chairs, doors – examined the kitchen without finding any interest, then ran to Militza's own little room, and she opened the door and went in with it. But soon it was tired of that too, and was pawing at the third door – that which led into her father's room – and Militza's heart stood still.

She tried to wheedle it away, but the dainties she now found for it it gobbled quickly, wagging its tail hypocritically, indifferent, it seemed, to the attempts to divert it. The scraps of food merely seemed to strengthen its resolve. After every mouthful it was back again at the door, pawing and snuffling and beginning to whine in its impatience. She tried cuffing

it, she tried leading it away, tried romping with it, but with healthy purpose it turned back every time to its aim. She drew herself up a moment, wondering what to do – she went to the kitchen door, to see if there was any chance of Radovan's going and taking it – but there he sat, bent over his glass of wine, in fierce argument with her father. At the head of the table, too, was that long-tongued fellow Yovan, grinning and delighting in the hot debate.

The dog, she could hear behind her, was getting more and more excited, pawing at the door, whining and yelping.

She forced herself to face the situation; told herself – what was quite true – that the animal only wanted to get in from a vague, general curiosity, that it could not possibly scent anything of *him*. So she decided the only thing to do was to let it go there, go with it, take it there, and with God's help get it out again without its having scented anything (because against reason she feared), or Radovan noticing its curiosity. One thing she was mortally afraid of was its getting at that crack by the stove and (whether after Artanovitch or mice), pawing away any more of the loose plaster and so disclosing the secret closet. She began to run back to let the dog in before it made more noise.

Radovan and Zhivko were at it about Marko Lentchitch. The joke, that had turned against Radovan, and been momentarily forgotten by him when he began to drink, had now, with more wine, begun to sour.

'I tell you Marko Lentchitch is a scoundrel!' he was shouting, as Militza looked from the door, 'he knows all about Bloody Nick!'

Zhivko felt very sure of himself. He could afford to play with fire now. 'You still think,' he asked, with a tipsy sneer, 'that dog of yours can scent the man out this time after. . . .'

'I tell you those dogs are. . . .' Radovan began to interrupt.

But at that moment, just before Militza could get back, the dog's impatience passed all bounds. It burst into a series of yelps and howls, then wild excited barking. It had been spoiled all the afternoon, and its master was not there to discipline it, and it resented being thwarted by a door.

'There's your fine dog,' cried Zhivko, in a sudden winy rage, 'kicking up hell in my house. You'll be thinking Artanovitch is *here* next!'

He did not foresee any danger.

But Radovan was already gone, swearing at the dog as he ran indoors to silence it.

When he came into the big room Militza had just opened the door of Zhivko's room, and he saw the dog as it bounded in with an excited howl. Howls in a bloodhound like that meant one thing to his obstinate mind. He ran forward to see what all the excitement could be about in Zhivko's house. The dog, overjoyed at getting into where his whim had taken him, leapt about, pawing Militza and snuffling corners by turns. And then, oh joy, he scented a mouse. The lumbering hound, whose nose was used for tracking men leapt forward lightly in eagerness to catch the so-much smaller animal.

Radovan, who reached the door open into the little room in ill-humour could think of nothing but his man-hunting. His thwarted lust for Lentchitch's blood blinded him to the consequences of finding traces of Bloody Nicholas there, in his father-in-law's house.

'What's all this?' he cried to Militza.

Militza's guilty face flushed.

'Nought but your dog restless. Smelled a rat.'

'Smelled a rat indeed,' Radovan muttered.

He stood watching the dog.

'What sort of a rat do you mean?' he suddenly asked Militza, and turned the full fishy bane of his eyes on her.

Militza still kept her presence of mind enough to tell herself that there was nothing yet in the dog's behaviour that might not be explained away. Yet she, of course, she too, in her guilt, had decided that the dog actually had scented Artanovitch.

'A rat,' she said, 'like any other, or a mouse maybe – with four legs and a tail.'

The dog meanwhile was tracking round and round the skirting of the room in a state of great agitation, scraping with its paws and whining.

Radovan then took no more notice of Militza. All his attention was on the dog.

'Psst! Psst! good boy,' he cried. 'Good fellow, good fellow.'

Bent double, he followed the animal to and fro, as if he expected Artanovitch to be concealed in the narrow crack between the warped skirting and the wall. And just when it began to seem to him how ludicrous after all the idea was, the dog once more began to yelp in excitement.

Then it sprang at the wall, and with one sweep of its huge nails it pawed a wide aperture down the side of the false stove.

Immediately cooler air blew into the room from the hollow wall.

'Ahah!' cried Radovan, and sprang to the crack and put his eye to it. In a moment his greedy eye accustomed itself to the gloom within. He distinguished the line along the eaves through which a faint off-glow of the fading light of day passed, and he saw the wall was hollow, the space so wide as to be nothing less than a secret room.

He turned to Militza. She was standing, her hands on her breasts, still and alarmed in the middle of the room, but when he turned she strove to control herself.

'What is this?' he asked.

'How should I know?' she said.

'You knew it was here before?'

'What is it?' she asked him. 'A mouse?'

'Dolt, come and look! Put your nose there! What is that?'

She pretended to be astonished.

'Holy Mary!' she cried, 'the wall's hollow. So that's why this stove never draws.'

'But it's never lit, maybe.'

'It's never lit because it draws so badly. Anyway, the other stove warms this room enough.'

Radovan leered at her. He began to poke at the crack round the stove, that now seemed suspicious. 'The old game' he muttered, and with one fierce heave he had swung the stove round, and opened the secret room. The dog, beside itself with delight, sprang into it. The place for it was full of exciting scents. It raced round the narrow space, drinking in the fresh set of delights, but Radovan for the moment was no longer interested in it. Of course Artanovitch was not there now—but for him it was clear now that he had been. Not for nothing had the tracks first led to Zhivko's orchard. Zhivko, the cunning dog, would know where he was now. There was no need to try to get any dogs to track Artanovitch's further flight, wherever the scent might lead, he would find another way to do the business with Zhivko.

'Keep this door closed,' he ordered Militza, and pointed at the door of the little room as he strode out.

Militza sank on to her father's bed, and buried her face in her hands and shivered. The world was falling round her. She heard Radovan stride outside to her father. She sank to the floor, and knelt there, bent forward, in despair, and there she remained a long time. The dog came and lay beside her.

Yovan Matitch must have left, for she heard her father and Radovan come into the great room and talk, quickly, sharply, in an undertone. She could not hear their words, but did not care. The world was now too black for her. It was a good hour before she could bring herself to go out into that room.

XI

WHEN Militza entered the room her father, her grandmother and Radovan were sitting at the table, wine in front of them as ever, in the dim light of the oil lamp on the wall; grouped just as her father, her grandmother and *he* had been, that day when Artanovitch took refuge with them. This time it was Radovan sat at the head of the table; her father again at the side; while the old woman sat like a kind of idol at the far end.

And, though there was no revolver dominating the scene, no threat like that, lying to Radovan's hand, the atmosphere was the same. For Radovan's eyes held the threat that was power. From time to time he struck the table gently with his podgy hand, which, white and clenched, lay before him on the table. And it was clear that the whole thing was out, and that he commanded – and that her father was completely in Radovan's power, and was submitting to all he demanded.

Militza took a place at the table, laid her arms on the table, and her head on her arms. Radovan shot one scornful glance at her, and turned away.

'She'll have to know, of course,' he said.

'Time for that,' her father answered.

'Can she be trusted?' Radovan asked, just as if she was not there before them in the room.

'If we don't tell her too soon. As for that – ' and her father gave an impatient nervy wave of his hand, – 'leave it all to me '

And the old woman, motionless at the head of the table, looked on with filmy eyes. As her son spoke she toothlessly moistened her hollow lips.

'Well, I'll be gone," Radovan said shortly, and got up and held his hand to Zhivko.

'Good-night,' Zhivko said, and shook it limply, as if lost in thought.

Mechanically Militza rose and accompanied Radovan, as had become the rule of the house, to the courtyard gate. Once outside the house (away from Zhivko's eye) his condescending scorn changed to a looser kind of familiarity than Militza had known him to go to ever before.

She saw he felt she was now absolutely in his power. He put an arm round her and fondled her breast with rough fingers.

'Now we know the use of dogs, eh, lass?' he said.

'Radovan—' she began. She felt she had to find out at once what was to happen.

'That'll be all right,' he said. 'Your father'll tell you how we'll manage that, eh? This'll be a nice sort of inn for the fine fellows of the road, eh? with you for the chambermaid, eh? Only mustn't let 'em make too free of you.'

As he spoke he began to do so himself.

With the burning thought at the back of her mind that now *he* was in some real danger – a danger threatened by Radovan and her father's plotting – she dared not resist. Scorched by shame and indignation she suffered Radovan's coarse fingers to do their work, while within her whirled a cloud of apprehension as to what was afoot. Was there not more in it than buying Radovan off with the money they had got from Artanovitch? Under that question 'can she be trusted' did there not lurk some awful menace? And the moment Radovan relinquished her and went his way the indignities she had suffered from him were forgotten in the general storm in her mind, and she went indoors to confront her father and question him.

She sat down opposite her father, and looked him boldly in the face. He was sitting with his eyes turned down to the table, and was fingering the nearly empty glass in front of him. He moistened his lips as if they were dry, although, full and moist, they glistened clearly in the dim lamplight. Then he raised his glass and drank the end of his wine with a loud gulp. Then he looked at his daughter.

She looked straight into his eyes. To her horror she saw them leer at her and finger her as Radovan did, but a minute before; and the memory of that came back clear again for a vile moment, like a second glimpse of some loathsome monster of the brain in the disorder of delirium. His looks said one reviling word to her; and though in her half-innocence she did not even repeat that word to herself, though it remained obscure in the nightmare fog, she shivered at the insult.

She saw that both now knew and talked of her love for *him* – and she saw how little either minded for her feelings or her real integrity. Her father leered at her, and then his face suddenly changed, and, condescendingly, gently, he smiled.

'Well?' he asked.

And in that unexpected absence of violence, absence of anger, absence of abuse, in that scornful gentleness, she realized her bonds, and lowered her head and waited for her father to speak and to order her. All her spirit in a second was broken. Like any other peasant girl she begged her father:

'What is to be done, Father?'

Her head was hung low, her voice dull and submissive.

Her father shrugged his shoulders.

'He knows, you see. The cat's out of the bag.' His voice was dull and hopeless.

'Yes, Father,' she said, 'what could I do?'

'Tut-tut, too late for that. If you of all people can't look after *his* interests, well' – Zhivko leant sideways and spat a great jet deliberately and violently to the floor – 'the sooner a firing squad finishes him off the better.'

'Father!' she cried, half pleading, half in dismay. She saw he looked on her as on any whore. 'If you of all people couldn't look after his interests. . . .' She saw that her love for Artanovitch neither sorrowed nor angered him – neither angered nor estranged Radovan. It was merely a coarse joke to them.

He did not answer at once. He folded his thick hands on the table before him and grinned at her. Was there not a sort of revenge for the freedom she had taken on herself in that grin of his? But was there not something at the same time appealing; a weak man, too weak to be really dismayed, too weak to be upright, appealing against the fate that had its will of him?

Suddenly he began to rock his head to and fro, and she could see his lips were drooping, curved bitterly down in grim resignation. Then he was still, and actually smiled at her again.

'Anyway, do you know he shot a policeman somewhere out on the Blasco road last night?' he asked.

She opened her mouth to speak, but words would not come. She heard her father's familiar voice go on, the voice now of a man with all he had dear to him at stake.

'Do you know the reward for him is doubled now?' he asked, in a voice full of anguish.

She got a glimpse of her father's position. He was between two fires. He meant her to see that they were at the mercy of Radovan, because Radovan could force their hand – because Radovan could now get more out of his share of betraying *him*

than he could if they, Artanovitch and their house, bought Radovan off.

'No, Father!' she cried in a small, dry voice. The 'no' on her lips was all her feeble attempt to ward off the treachery that she saw was planned. The thought of perishing with Artanovitch crossed the mind of neither father nor daughter then.

Zhivko grinned again; a miserable forced grin, and forged monotonously on.

'And you know, I suppose, the reward's to be trebled if he's caught alive? Half to us and half to Radovan, don't you see what it means?'

He paused.

'It's the only way. It's a good sum. Thank God Radovan is affianced to you, or we were lost. We'll get him alive, he's sure to turn up here again in a day or two. They're hounding him close from Blasco after this shooting. You're to save us all, you're to do it for us; make it safe, you'll draw his teeth, it's all planned out; you'll drug him.' And though Zhivko cared naught that he, the man she loved, was the sacrifice, still at the horror of treachery he was proposing, his voice sank to a whisper. Thus the plot, at last, came in a troubled rush of words, and anyone could have seen that Zhivko, through the narrow slit of his heavy eyelids, was eyeing his daughter anxiously to see how she would take it. He was still full of fears lest her love for Bloody Nicholas might be of that youthful sort that fears no foolish sacrifice let it but be loyal and true.

But stricken Militza did not see this fear in him. Her wide-open eyes glared at the coarse boards of the table. Their fixed round glare was bovine; as if, with those blank glassy spheres she somehow discerned whither the drovers were goading her, and was full of horror and revulsion, but

yet went slowly and steadily lurching on. After all, too, whatever was done, in the end they would get him – so why should they all go to prison or death with him? She bowed her head. After all, she was a woman. After all, that was her woman's lot.

At this point the old woman her grandmother came into the room and sat at the table beside her. Evidently she had been listening to all they had said, had watched all that had passed between them. Militza looked up, and the black film-swept eyes beat gently over her, embraced her. The old woman put her gnarled fingers, warm and convulsively pressing, on her shoulders.

'Has our Militza seen well?' Militza heard her asking. From the corner of her eye she could see her father's head nod impatiently.

'Thank God,' her grandmother said. 'The Lord's will is good. His ways are hid from us, but His hand is sure.'

Militza smiled weakly at her through tear-wet eyes. She suddenly felt still, cold, tired of it all; and, strangely enough, sorry for her father. She laid her hand on his arm.

'Are you hungry, Daddy?' she asked, and went out, with a steady even walk, and brought in food, and refilled the wine flask on the table.

XII

AFTER that moment, during the tense two days that followed, there was a grave-like silence in the house on the hillside. Not one word was spoken in reference to Artanovitch. Had Militza even wanted to talk of what filled her every limb with the cramp of terror, her father's stony-set face would have been enough to stop her. There was only one solace in the situation – that Radovan showed his face but for a few minutes each day. Militza felt herself bound, felt herself in a kind of prison. She kept her eyes sullenly to the ground lest anyone see the yearning and the struggle in them. She assiduously followed the household round. But she could not help shivering with each strange sound and in her bed at night she covered herself in the bedclothes, intoxicated with heat, and stupefied by the wine that she drank to bring sleep on herself, and by fear. She had not long to wait, for it was on the second night that he came.

Though she had seemed to be asleep muffled in bedclothes she heard the cautious tap, tap-tap, tap, tap-tap, on the window of the great room, and her father's hushed oath as he went to open the door, and her bowels seemed like tangles of freezing wet rope inside her as she strained her ears to what was happening.

The door opened and *he* came in, and the sound of his voice, a trifle hoarser, for he was wearied by constant flight, warmed her chilled limbs. She crept to the door of her room and opened it a chink, and looked out.

They stood in the middle of the room, her father four inches shorter than Nicholas. The weak oil-lamp was turned low, but she could see by it that, though he arrived in hot flight, his clothes were not dust-grimed, as they had been

before, and he was not unshaved, as he had been before. His moustaches were curled back, and her father, with his shirt unbuttoned at the neck, his hair unkempt, three days growth of hair round his cheeks, looked more like the hard-pressed fugitive than did that other magnificent man.

'I think I slipped them,' he was saying, 'I doubled back right into Blasco, you see, and rode out here on the postvan.'

'Are you crazy?' Zhivko asked.

'Not I,' said Artanovitch. His eyes were sweeping the room. He was looking for her. 'All abed, I suppose. Must I get to my hole at once?'

'What possessed you to put your nose in Blasco, you fool?'

'Business, Zhivko, my boy. Business with the barber – you see, I couldn't. . . .'

She interrupted him. To her father's dumbfounded amazement she went boldly into the room. She was not even fully dressed, she had only a belt over her embroidered undergown. Her hair fell in plaits at her back. Her full bosom showed to all its advantage without the concealing zouave of her peasant costume. Her eyes were afire.

Artanovitch, too, started back, he equally surprised at her boldness. He turned to face her. He greeted her and held out his hand, and his eyes devoured her. He could not divine what was the change in her. There was a fever glassiness in her eyes.

She made no attempt to dissemble her feelings for him. He looked sharply at her father to see how he took this outrage of all the decencies of conduct.

Zhivko's face was thunderous black, but there was something defeated, something cowed in it, but Artanovitch did not care and let the flame of his passion flare to a beacon all could see.

Because, here, at last, thing he had never believed in,

Artanovitch saw before him what he had come to find – a woman worthy of him; who, casting off all veils of prudery met his rebel love honestly with her equal love. He gloried in the sight of her, for she had risen above the herds of others, cattle.

He took her hand and did what before he had only done to a woman's hand when drunk – he kissed it. In his eyes she was worthy of great homage. In her eyes how different he was from that other who was wont once to kiss her hand in his hypocrisy!

He turned to Zhivko, who now for the first time really noticed that Artanovitch was spruce, more as if he had come to a wedding-table than as a fugitive, to hide in a hole in a wall. He suspected why he had not escaped from their neighbourhood, or why he had come back there. 'You see,' Artanovitch repeated, 'I had business with the barber. I couldn't enter your house again like a filthy pig.'

For the moment, under the tidal wave of excitement, Militza had lost all fear.

'Nicholas must eat and drink first,' she said, to her father, and from the clatter going on in the kitchen it was obvious that the old woman thought the same. Zhivko made a helpless gesture with a powerless hand. He was paralysed. He saw the madness of love in Militza's eyes, and was fearful at that moment to counter her, lest, when the hour came, it prove impossible to bend her to their plan – lest in the end she preferred, in her madness, the disgrace and violent death of trying to escape with her lover to the horror of *betraying him.*

'Only quietly!' was all he said.

Militza went to her grandmother in the kitchen, and while the old woman fanned the charcoal fire she broke eggs to cook, and carried bread, wine, peppers, knives ready into the great room. Her father and Artanovitch sat at the table,

but in the atmosphere of hatred between them they spoke little. Artanovitch then related the story of how he had been obliged to shoot the gendarme, how he had covered his traces to and from Blasco, how he had taken the postvan and quitted it a little outside the village, where the Predoratz road branched off.

It was a strange feast to which they sat, some minutes later. Artanovitch was considerably hungry, and in spite of the excitement of the hour he dealt heartily with rough omelette and dull red wine. He kept his head just sufficiently to remember that any moment an emergency might arise in which he would need all his strength. Militza, too, ate well and drank well. Only her father did not, but merely sipped moodily at a glass of wine. It was an insane supper, this.

The old woman, a little drunk on her plum spirits, fitfully in her thin and cracked voice half sang, half hummed snatches of songs of lovers meeting and songs, too, of marriage. There was a gleam of light behind the filmy veils of her uneasy bead-eyes.

While they supped Artanovitch went rapidly over all he had done since he left their roof – all for Militza's ears.

At last Zhivko could stand it no longer.

'Enough of this,' he said, 'there's a lot of tongues been wagging about here in the last few days, and people'll see the light so late and wonder.'

He rose and led the way to the hole in the wall, which had expressly not been prepared in case Artanovitch, finding it ready, suspected the death trap it was now to be.

The women quickly brought bedding, water, the axe for the wall, all exactly as before. They let him into his trap, but the time to take him had not yet come. Radovan had to be prepared first, and a gendarme trusted to tell no unnecessary tales brought to take him over, drugged as he was to be and

helpless. There could be no question of risking an issue with Bloody Nicholas not drugged.

He stepped into the hole, his great figure bent. Before it closed he reached out his hand and touched Militza's.

'Good-night!' he called.

She did not answer him with a good-night, but with a phrase meaning ' so long.'

Nobody noticed it, or, if they did, nobody credited the words with their real significance.

. . . . . .

At dawn the next day the old woman was afoot. She opened the door of Militza's room. It was not fastened at all. She peered in. Militza's bed was empty.

She smiled – she understood – she had suspected.

She went out into the yard, and into the penthouse against the wall. Against the wall which was the outer wall of Artanovitch's refuge a large wooden box had been placed. She crept up to the wall. Peering down the space between that box and the wall she could see that in the portion of wall hidden by the box the temporary filling had been removed, and the hole opened. Her shrewd suspicions were confirmed.

She crept away, and then, by the penthouse opening, she began noisily to call the hens, thus warning the sleeping lovers, bustling and clattering as much as possible. Then she went indoors again.

A few minutes later the kitchen door opened, and a ghostly figure in white crept in on tiptoe. It was Militza, coming back. The old woman looked into the girl's face. It was weary, determined, satisfied; yet in the eyes was fear. They were too restless, they stared too hardly ahead.

The old woman said nothing. She smiled kindly on her grandchild, nodded good-morning to her, and went on with her work, as if she really believed Militza was merely coming

in from the closet in the courtyard. She kept her peace because the girl's eyes so fixed told her that as yet she had given Artanovitch no hint of his danger. The fear in her eyes meant that the burden was still on her. There was, then, still hope for a satisfactory end to it all.

XIII

On dragged the morning, and not a word spoken of the man who lay hidden, (in safety, as he imagined) between the false double walls. Early Zhivko went down to see Radovan, and shortly after Radovan went off posthaste to Blasco to see the sergeant of gendarmes that he regarded as his reliable man. The sergeant's reward was to be that he would reap the honour of capturing Artanovitch; he would tell the story they had cooked up of how in Zhivko's absence Artanovitch intimidated Militza, but Militza, with wonderful presence of mind, drugged him with the help of the old woman and ran for Radovan, who would happen to be sitting at that hour in the *kafana* with the sergeant. The sergeant would get promotion, and have a little of the blood-money too.

Militza knew the plan; but she did not know how she would act when the time came. It all seemed so impossible, so far from her, that she hardly gave it a thought. The dizzy world seemed to be standing still. The glorious madness of the night had passed. Her body was tired, her mind was tired. She was sucked dry of all power to move.

Her lover, shut in the narrow four walls, not daring even to come out in the way he might have done – the now open way through the penthouse that she had opened to go secretly to him by – seemed as far away himself and was unreal as any year or any deed of childhood past. She had become passive, seemed to be waiting for something which would set that dull stilled world in motion again.

After long hours, in the afternoon, her father and Radovan arm in arm, slightly flushed with drink, appeared at the courtyard gate and made their way indoors.

'Come, Militza,' her father ordered. 'Bring glasses, bring wine!'

The end had come.

Blindly she welcomed it. If yesternight had been her wedding night, this might well be a drunken orgy of death.

They all four sat at table: her father, freshly-shaved, flushed in blotches under the rough powder the village barber had put on; her affianced Radovan, his piggy little eyes active and bright; her grandmother, deeper than ever in her black kerchief, mumbling texts and saws; and herself.

'Do you see, Militza,' her father said, 'that if you help us get him alive, not only will we all escape scot free, ah? and with a good nest egg, too, out of it, but he may get off without the death sentence. They know the worst thing of all for a man like that is to be in chains all his life, and they'd make a warning of him for the others; that great fine fellow in coarsest homespun dragging a twenty-pound weight to his ankles in the quarries all his life, they'd reckon – but then we'd get him away all right, we'd see to that, eh, Radovan?'

Her grandmother had warned them she must be wheedled into the task. She listened carefully.

'And if they shoot him as they will if they don't capture him drugged and sleeping, that's the end of him.'

She hazily understood that they were pleading with her. It was they were afraid of her, then, afraid lest she be true to Nicholas Artanovitch yet. They were begging her. They were trying to show her it was better for her to betray him. But when she plucked up courage they turned and threatened her, showed they were determined, had burned all boats behind them.

'And now we've had to let Sergeant Liouba into it there's no other way out. Except chains for the lot of us.'

Her father's lips were set, his jaw set. Radovan looked

sullen, brutishly obstinate. They were forcing her into a corner. Then most unexpectedly, Radovan, too, pleaded again.

'Come, Militza,' he said, 'be sensible. There's then a long life and a peaceful one ahead of us. We'll buy a house in Blasco town, if you like; we'll leave the village.'

But she leant over towards her father, ignoring Radovan.

'Is it true the police already know?' she asked, quietly but savagely.

'Absolutely. And if Sergeant Liouba's thwarted you needn't think he'll be kind and keep quiet.'

'They really know Artanovitch is here?' She still, though thus confronted with the bare fact, could not believe that of all people, the police already knew of him, Nicholas, lying there in that wall trapped in refuge, in that narrow hole.

'I tell you,' her father answered her curtly, 'that Radovan's Sergeant Liouba knows – and if we don't play fair with him now, of course the matter won't end well for us.'

For a moment his cool use of the word 'fair' 'play fair' in such a moment of foul treachery would have enabled Militza to stick a knife into her own father, had she had one in her hand. Her blood swept to her face, and she rose to her feet. The two men saw her feeling, and they instinctively drew back. But as quickly they remembered she was only a girl, and their lips curled in mockery.

She would have reviled them, and she opened her mouth to do this, but then in their eyes both of them again showed such scorn for her, such coarse recognition of her love for Artanovitch, that instinctively she put up her hands to hide her face from them, and sank slowly back to her seat.

She was not even sure they were ignorant of what had been in the night. She could not even be sure her old grandmother (who must have known) would keep a still tongue. In their

faces she saw reflected their scorn for her looseness (as they thought it was) and in a flash was brought home to her all it would mean if she went her own way. Whether in hiding with Artanovitch or free or in jail awaiting trial, she would be a piece of dirt to them all. This struck her lower and lower again, till she hung her head and submitted.

'That's right, my girl,' her father said.

And Radovan, as the two of them went out, patted her patronizingly on the shoulder.

'Your grandmother knows all about it! She'll tell you what to do!' her father called back from the door. *His* task was light enough.

. . . . . .

It was half-past four. The sun was still high enough in the sky to burn, for there was not a single cloud, from horizon to horizon. The ground was parched and cracking. It was fiercer and drier, this mid-June day, than any August day in England. The shadows, although growing lengthier, were transparent and crisp.

Militza's grandmother brought her a half-litre flask of wine.

'Take him this,' she said, 'and get him to drink it as soon as possible.'

Militza, staring out on the taut sun-lit landscape through the small window of the great room, nodded slowly and took the flask, and with slow heavy steps moved towards the room where the stove was. Then she paused, and set the flask down on the table. Her mind was prey to all fears and forebodings.

'One moment, Granny,' she said, and went out into the courtyard, and up into the orchard.

Darkness seemed to descend on her. It was, as she had suspected, too late. In the field at the top of the orchard lay

a gendarme on guard, with his rifle ready. The house was surrounded.

She went back, and past the penthouse through the acacia thicket and peered through the silvery foliage of the willows at the opposite bank of the stream. There, too, lay a gendarme, his rifle ready. Radovan's sergeant, she saw, did not trust Radovan, and was taking no chances. The house was surrounded.

With heavy bowels she went miserably back indoors. There was then now no way out.

Together she and her grandmother moved the stove away. 'Nicholas,' she called. But he was already at the opening. He did not speak, but the old woman, who saw his face, knew that eyes can be more eloquent than mere words, that others have used and crumpled and worn.

'Shh!' said Militza, 'there are people about; but I had to bring you some wine, had to see you, whatever the risk!'

Automatically the words and gestures of the part she had to act came to her. She crept into the hole. 'You keep watch, Granny, at the window!' she called out. Once she had started she found how easy it was to be Delilah. Perhaps some vague remembrance of the bible story came to her as she knelt beside her Samson and passed her fingers through his curls and filled his glass. How easy, indeed, it all was; so easy that she wondered if he, too, would not eventually see that this had been the best, the only way.

'In a quarter of an hour he should be sleeping,' her grandmother had said, and in her mind, his sleeping became synonymous with his death, and death was but a sleep in her arms. Her brain had stopped all thought in her of the months of suffering and degradation to come before he was led to a criminal's death. She even felt she was bringing him

with gentle ease out of a troublous life. At least, she who loved him was doing it, and no other.

Partly from fear of the ears of any stranger coming quickly, partly in lovers' toying, they did not speak, except in short whispers, with little endearing words. She falsely caressed him, and sipped, too, of his glass to please him, but all the while she took good care to keep it filled for him, so that he drank deeply of it.

There was now a day's growth of beard on his fine face, but this could be no blemish to the outline of his bronze head, and Militza, in wonderment, dwelt on the features that had so recently been revealed to her in their undaunted beauty. And, because she had first known them and had known them best in the night which had just past she felt them now with her fingers even, just to learn them more and to take farewell of them; and her fingers trembled slightly. If he lived to curse her would he not always think that perhaps she had been tricked too ? Could he ever believe she had so falsely caressed him into bondage and death?

At last the drug the old woman had put in the wine began to do its work. Militza, painfully alert to see any change in him noticed the eyes growing heavy. Even she herself, who had drunk so little, felt slightly dazed. These were the last moments of them together on earth, she realized; because of the heaviness in her own limbs she realized it; and she bent convulsively down and glued her lips to his.

And then, at that touch, all the world went black and was changed, all the world swam in blood, as if a whitehot brazen sun were hammering on her temples and blinding her, and for the first time she saw in all its horror what she had done.

She broke away from him and started fearfully up.

'Nicholas,' she cried, but yet so the old woman might not hear, 'Nicholas, listen; listen, Nicholas!'

He raised somewhat drowsy, contented eyes to hers.

'Danger, Nicholas, danger, the wine is drugged!'

He hardly seemed to realize what she was saying, and sweat started out all over her body.

'Don't you hear, the wine is drugged! I know it is. It is a plot. Then they'll come for you. Go before it is too late!'

She heaved the box violently back from the opened hole in the wall, and hot but fresh air from the penthouse poured into the hole.

It had been, in the two days that they had waited for him to come, one of her plans to escape with him by that hole, through which she had gone to him in the night; when, by her weakness, she had failed to tell him and to fly there and then with him, but had stayed, wrapped in the hot present. Now she regretted with all her body's pain all that was now lost. She knew she, with her slow woman's body, could not escape with him even if she would. She now imagined, poor fool, that if he got away she would have the strength and the purpose to join him after.

At last the meaning of her words had dawned on him. He himself began to feel that his sleepiness was not natural. He felt he was drugged.

He was on his feet, swaying slightly.

His presence of mind had not left him. Quickly he applied a carouser's trick – thrust a finger down his throat and in a moment, though still sick and nervously retching, he had thrown up all the wine, was free of the drug except for what had already soaked into his organism. He did not pause to think of whether *she* were innocent or guilty. He was himself again, had no thought but for action.

He drew his revolver, slipped back the catch, crept through the hole, crept from the shed, and down through the acacia thicket.

His head was heavy.

The sun, still hot and bright, put him aback, for he had spent long hours in semi-darkness.

He noticed the gendarme on the other bank at the same moment as the one at the top of the orchard noticed that someone had just emerged from the penthouse, and had looked closer and spotted him. There was nothing for it but a dash. He sprang to his feet and dashed down the bank.

As he mounted the other side the second of the gendarmes, on watch there, saw him and levelled at him, calling him to stop. There was nothing else for it. He paused a second and fired, at short range, and the man, surprised, caught in the bowels, collapsed and rolled over with a groan, and down into the ditch.

And he was away with a good thirty yards start, and in a minute was running desperately under the afternoon sun, which was shining straight in his face. He made for a field of wheat. He could hear them pounding behind, calling on him not to be a fool, that he was caught, to give himself up – but he ran on, horribly conscious that he was partly drugged, and his legs were dragging. They began to fire; zip, zip, the bullets dogged his heels, and then, just as he reached the wheat, where he could have got cover and perhaps winged them all, there was a searing tearing pain in his right thigh, and he fell headlong into the ripe yellow grain. He fell heavily, at full length, his right leg out of action; and in falling his revolver jerked from his hand and fell away from him among the corn.

He heard the exulting cry of one of the men behind him – there seemed still to be four of them; and then one of them warning the others to be cautious, that he still might fire as they came up. He cursed his luck that he could not. He struggled clumsily forward to get his revolver, but in the

wheat where it had fallen he could not see it, and while he was thus hopelessly struggling they sprang on him from behind, and one of them clubbed him on the head once, twice, three times with the butt of his rifle, and the heavy world went out.

Nicholas Artanovitch at last was a helpless prisoner.

. . . . . .

By the time they had carried him down to the house Radovan, Zhivko and the sergeant were there. The plan of the afternoon (to take him drugged), had miscarried – no one knew for the moment how, for all Militza could say was: 'I gave him the wine and then he escaped.' This she repeated hysterically time after time, so that in the end they left her, the fool, to her woman's hysterics. But though it had miscarried, and one of the uniformed men lay slowly bleeding, groaning, on Zhivko's bed, the main thing was done: Bloody Nicholas was laid low. And, as Radovan, the sergeant and Zhivko agreed, substantially the same tale as had already been agreed upon would serve to explain how they had got their man.

It was a recognized principle that a bandit's friends turned-informer were to be protected by the police, their past connection with him forgotten, their betrayal of him rewarded, their foul behaviour regarded as loyal citizens' honourable work, 'King's informer.'

XIV

When Artanovitch came to himself and opened his eyes it was dark; he lay on his back, bound and trussed from head to toe, on the floor of a peasant cart, which was rattling and bounding along the high road. His head ached and throbbed, and he could feel the hair on his left temple matted and clotted with blood, stuck to his skin. But the greatest pain came from his wounded thigh. He had a vague impression he was lying in a pool of water, but slowly he realized it was his own blood. On either side of him he could dimly distinguish a gendarme, seated on the sides of the waggons, in the hand of each a rifle with bayonet fixed. He felt a faint thrill of pride. Even like that, wounded, battered, half-conscious, trussed, they feared him.

And so it ended, for the present. Hospital, he supposed, for a week or so, and then a cellar, chains, trial, then, trussed again, back to a stake in a ready-dug grave and six lumps of lead thudding through him. If he did not escape. There were weeks ahead of him yet.

He gave little thought for the moment to how he was captured; but sank quickly again to a nightmare of half-consciousness. At every hole in the badly-made badly-repaired high road his bruised and broken head was bumped on the boards of the waggon, and his trussed body rolled, like a bleeding corpse, first to one side, then to the other, and pressed the ropes that bound him hard into his wound.

And when he came to again he was lying on the operating table, with a violent retching sensation in his bowels, and they were binding up his wound. There were two gendarmes there, with fixed bayonets, and once again Artanovitch could

not resist a rare feeling of delight. He had never realized that he was considered so dangerous, and the thought that as they trundled his helpless body along the hospital corridor and into the ward two hale men with loaded rifles had to be there to watch him, made the beginning of his final agony some sort of triumphal procession. He tried to speak, but words came feebly.

'Let them bind my arms too,' he said to one of the sisters and tried to nod towards the gendarmes, but the sister, with some diffidence merely laid her hand for a moment on his shoulder and shrugged herself helplessly. Either she did not understand or did not wish to speak to him.

Once more he fell into unconsciousness, because the clubbing he had got from the gendarmes when they caught him had slightly cracked his skull; and the effects of exhaustion, lack of blood, the drug, and the anæsthetic were still on him; but when, two days later, he finally came to, in the hospital bed, he saw once more that they did not trust him, were afraid lest he had been shamming unconsciousness, for a heavy cuff of iron was round his right wrist and chained him to his bed. They were allowing no chance whatever of his escape.

But now his thoughts had cleared somewhat, and he began to puzzle over the drugged wine, trying to understand who had drugged it. It was difficult to remember what had happened, and it was only by degrees that he got his mind back to Militza's afternoon visit in all its detail. He lay, bandaged and chained, on his bed, looking far past the gendarme on guard opposite him, and cursed Zhivko for the swine he was. But even then he acquitted Militza as honest; he remembered that she too had drunk of the wine. She would not have done this, he thought, had she been sure it was drugged. He imagined that she had perhaps half over-

heard something, suspected something; and that with a woman's wit she was the first to feel the drug, and then only had understood what she had but half heard.

Indeed, in a long gallery of women, as in his painful chained inactivity he gnawed to and fro over his life, Militza stood out as nearest to him, the last he had had, and by far the best, as different from the women he had known as he believed himself to be different from the worms, other men, round him.

He had shown them how to live as a free animal, and they had chained him down. Now they would go through their monkey farce of trying him, and then they would take him solemnly away with doctors and watches and stethoscopes and shoot him and listen to his heart, for ever stilled, and enter it all like fools in a book.

And she – would they accuse her? But to all his questions as to who else was arrested the sisters shook their heads and said 'none.' And because they showed no excitement, any one day, he concluded what he dared not ask about – that as yet Militza was safe in her father's house. The traitor had been able to protect her.

And he was sure that had she but known the names of any others of his men she would have gone outlaw too, and be working with them to save him. But as it was what could she do? Tied to that buffoon Radovan! Yet, none the less, he was sure she would eventually break away from her father and Radovan and help him escape, and join him, so together they would show their scorn for a craven world.

But weeks wore by, and no news came of her. For when he left the hospital for an underground cell and leg-irons, and the examining magistrate exacted his first statements from him, he could get no idea of what was passing in the outer world. It was the police who wanted information from him –

as to where his men could be found, as to the meaning of his selecting Zhivko's house as a refuge.

But he told them he did not know where his men were, that had he known where they were he would have let the glorious sun, that he could never see in their filthy cell, come pouring through their putrid bodies as water through a sieve.

And all he heard of Militza was when they asked him question after question as to the way he had attacked her and threatened her when he went to Zhivko's house and found her alone. And as he concluded that this story was the way Zhivko was hiding his daughter's sin and protecting her, and as he still had faith in her joining him eventually, he scornfully agreed to all they suggested he had done, and it all was written up against him. And he put his hand to it, with a steady flourish and enormous capital N and A.

. . . . . .

June had passed long ago, and July dragged by, unbearable days in the sultry, foul air of his gloomy underground cell, and August went; and on the ill food, with no opportunities to be clean, he grew pale and gaunt, a mere wraith of what he had been; and his clothes wore thin and foul. But at last, in late September, the day for his trial drew near, and to save their faces the police brought in a clothier from the town, and he was dressed in new clothes, and given water, soap, a towel, and the prison barber was sent to him. And in his pride and scorn of the craven who would coop him in a fence of bayonets and round gaping faces, because they had lost the guts to shoot him outright as he, had he a gun in his hands, would shoot them, he made his toilet carefully, and carefully kneaded the muscles of his body, stiff from long cramped weeks, so that when he strode into the court-room he would stride in more a conqueror than a man conquered.

. . . . . .

At ten in the morning, one bright, late September day, the court was assembled for his trial, and the presiding judge signalled to the sergeant of gendarmes by the door to bring in the prisoner. There was a hush in the court, that usual breathless hush of the first great morbid moment in a capital trial – the moment when the prisoner makes his first appearance – the man for weeks beforehand hidden from the world, but who has yet been the cynosure of the world, and whose hands – says law-and-order – are stained with blood. After a few seconds the clank of irons could be heard, and a shuffle of numerous feet. And in that shuffle a quick ear could have distinguished a clean soft pad, pad, pad of peasant sandals. The door into the court opened and two gendarmes with fixed bayonets came in, clumping with their ill-fitting army boots. Behind them came two more; and in the centre of that little square of steel was Artanovitch.

He was drawn to his full height. The weeks of privation of food, air and movement had worn down his flesh, but the great frame was unchanged. He walked freshly, however cramped by his guards he was; walked cleanly, though one thigh, from his roughly-treated wound, was stiff, and on his ankles were irons, the chain and great weight from which he held out before him at his waist. The hundred yards through the open air from the prison to the court had brought a momentary flush to his cheeks, but this flush only accentuated their essential pallor. The ascetic transformation of the man allowed all his untamed beauty to come out; the coarseness of which latterly there had been not a little, and which popular fear and terror at his lightly-done murders had naturally pictured as greater than it ever had been, was all one.

There was, for a fickle moment, genuine surprise, perhaps even homage, in the customary gasp that passed through the court when the accused appeared.

For the moment too indignant, too dignified, to care for the details of what was before him, his eyes fixed on the hills and woods that could be seen, above the roofs, from the Blasco courthouse window, Artanovitch took his stand in the little dock and faced his judges. The tiresome proceedings began.

. . . . . .

Monotonously the ivory-skinned little clerk of the court droned on, reading the charges against Artanovitch, the statement he had made before the police; and bit by bit, in his weariness of it all, Artanovitch came to earth and began to survey the hall, every inch of it filled with sightseers.

And then his blood ran cold and he clenched the railing under his hands.

In the second row sat, among other witnesses, Zhivko, the brazen-faced traitor, and by him Radovan Miloutinovitch, and by him, *she*, Militza, whom he had dreamed of as waiting for the moment to escape with him – Militza, fashed out in new town clothes that sat her awkwardly.

Her eyes were lowered; her hands folded in her lap.

And then on his ears, in the account of his own statement, began to drum the story they had put into his mouth of how he had intimidated her, but yet the name the clerk read out seemed strange. And he refused to listen to it, but at last his ears were forced to admit what they had been trying to spue out, and he knew that she was referred to as *Militza Miloutinovitch, then spinster*. And he saw, as her hands (for she could feel his eyes on her), more and more nervously moved, on her finger the bar of gold of marriage; and he knew at last how cruelly he had been fooled.

For a moment there was the old impulse to act. He must have started, as if to spring forward, for the gendarmes, on either side of him, started up too, nervously, and a murmur

of alarm immediately ran through the dummies in court gaping at him in their stupid rows.

But supreme contempt welled up in him. Too well he, who for months had lived by his power to act and his knowledge of when to act, knew that to try thus, surrounded by four bayonets, with chains hampering his weakened legs, to get at those three, to try, if only to spit in their false faces, could end but in degrading failure. During his weeks of confinement, so well guarded that nearly all thought of escape had left him; his pride of liberty had taken refuge in his spirit, and by that alone now would he thwart the craven crowd ranged before him in defence of their mean despicable ways.

He shut out all thought of those wretched details and once more, in supreme indifference (or in insolent indifference, as the press reporters said) he stared away yonder through the dirty windows of the courthouse; and the interruption of the proceedings first to the mid-day meal and then, as the sun sank towards the lurid horizon, for the night, merely aggravated him.

The trial lasted until the second afternoon, and in all its long hours one thing only he noticed. When, on the second day, the court rose for the mid-day meal, and the moment the court stopped gourmand Radovan hurried his wife away, he suddenly was aware that her belly had grown full and round; fuller and rounder than (unless she had been married to Miloutinovitch immediately after his capture), could possibly be the fruit of Miloutinovitch's work. In this thought that maybe she bore his child he found secret exultation.

And when his mess of stew was brought him to eat, he asked the warder of the courthouse cells to tell him when Radovan Miloutinovitch had married. *Her* name he would not pronounce. It was now more foul to him than that of the man.

'On the third of this month,' the court warder said. 'You didn't hear of it?'

'How should I?' he asked scornfully.

'Well enough,' said the warder. 'It was the biggest affair there's been in Blasco this many a day. He's bought old Sarko the jeweller's house and come to town to live. Lot o' money knocking about there.'

Artanovitch smiled ironically to himself. He felt satisfied, somehow at ease. He now felt sure the child that Militza already carried within her was his child. What a fool, what a miserable craven that fellow Miloutinovitch must be!

In the end, whatever came, he, who had never been bound by anything but by way of a woman's trickery, would triumph. His child, whether the world knew it or not (and of that he cared naught), would stand between them, and in whatever measure she had been false to him, his child under Miloutinovitch's roof would be a scourge to her soul.

That afternoon the trial ended, and the court retired to council, and the usher announced that sentence would be made known the following day at noon. What was there then to discuss, Artanovitch asked himself, and what could be expected but one thing? Apart from his robbery and pillage he answered for eight souls, and he had made no attempt before his judges to deny those eight deaths, that he believed he had at least as much right as wrong to cause. His mind was open to the fullness of universal life, and individual life, his own included, was a trifling thing.

But their imbecile formalities, their craven fear to act before they had so divided the responsibility that none was left, no longer exasperated him. It was so like watching the busy fuss of an army of ants that it seemed to him one breath of a being such as he was himself could disperse them all as if they had never been.

The long readings of the findings of the court, the following day, drew at last towards a close, towards the verdict. He looked up, and it amused him to see that Militza was not present; Zhivko and Radovan Miloutinovitch still showed their full, mean faces.

And the sentence came – what he had expected – to death by shooting – and the day, four days ahead, 'on Thursday next.'

He did not move a muscle; was ready, as usual, with calm tread to leave the court. But for his pale skin he would have been taken for a bronze copy of a man; and even the presiding judge, used enough to such scenes, was disconcerted by the serene absence of either fear or scorn in this man whom whole counties had feared for his quick passion and his cruelty.

XV

MILITZA had been afraid to go to the pronouncement of judgement, not because she was afraid for what it would be – there was no question of that, for it was certain to be death – but because she could no longer trust herself to look on Artanovitch and bear up. And she, of all people, dare not faint in court for Bloody Nicholas' sake. There had been enough suspicion and whispering already. But the most terrible thing, in one way, to her would have been to bear her husband's eyes, that stripped not only her body of its clothes every time they looked on her, but stripped her very soul of its shoddy covering. She feared, because she knew that the first time that word, for her ever now so nearly on his lips, should come, would be a blow of a whip under which she would cower for the rest of her mean days. And if, in front of all the public and of him, Artanovitch, she broke down for his, Artanovitch's sake, she knew the world would take up the stinking echo, and her name would be rancid on every man and every woman's lips.

But on Thursday, as their house, formerly Sarko the Jeweller's, was on the Blasco market square, and he was to pass that way to his death, she stationed herself at the upper window, behind thick curtains, to have one last blood-curdling glimpse of the lover she had won so quickly, and had so quickly sold. From her husband, who was early gone to be present, in the company of her father and Marko Lentchitch and Matitch the tax-collector, at the stake, she knew the hour he was to pass.

It was to be done – Marko Lentchitch's sweet revenge, they said – on the hill crest, on the Sintzi edge of the Belodor woods, nearabouts where on that morning of early

June he had held up Lentchitch and commandeered his horse.

There was a fair sprinkling of people on the pavements of the little town, although it was barely light, when Artanovitch went to his death. The leg-irons, according to custom, had been removed the night before, and he was merely handcuffed. He sat on a seat in the middle of a common waggon, and gendarmes with bayonets ready on their cocked rifles were all round him. He sat lightly, his head well up, but Militza Miloutinovitch had no need to shrink further back from the curtain against the window embrasure, for his eyes were not on any of the houses as they passed, but were trying to see out beyond the houses, in the fields beyond.

Only when they were nearly out of the market square did the courthouse warder, who was present, think of something. He spoke to Artanovitch. Pointing back, he nodded his head. Artanovitch for a moment turned his eyes back towards the house of Sarko the Jeweller that the Miloutinovitches had bought.

And then he was gone. He was gone, and pregnant Militza turned back to the bourgeois splendour of her bedroom, the plenty of immense pillows, the flashily new sateen of the eiderdowns. She passed through the next room and threaded her way over the gaudy carpets between little tables covered with nicknacks, and sat down, aimlessly, at the kitchen table, indifferent to the chatter of Kata, her slatternly maid-of-all-work, who repeatedly pushed her mistress's morning cup of coffee and milk before her, to try to get her to breakfast, and talked in one breath of Bloody Nicholas and the cares of the kitchen.

. . . . . .

All those months, ever since the early spring, Artanovitch had not seen his mistress, Juliana. Yet there, perhaps, she

might have been, in Blasco, all the time he lay awaiting trial. Yet no, she would not have been; she would run no risks. She at least was frank, fickle but frank. No doubt long ago she had already abandoned Hutchko too.

And then he went over all the members of his life, all those with whom he had been, in the last few years, chiefly concerned, men and women; but in spite of himself his thoughts gravitated to women; and then he found himself measuring by the frankness with which they revealed their false, shallow minds. For all were false, and it was but a matter of whether they were openly mercenary, as Juliana, or. . . .

And thus his mind came back to *her*, to Militza Trifounatz, and still he was puzzled, and found he still regarded her as an exception. In her the fault was that she was far weaker – alas, to his destruction – than her less mercenary heart demanded. And so even she, Militza wife of Radovan Miloutinovitch, living in the house of a Blasco jeweller, had gone the cupidous way of them all.

What a frump in her town clothes she was, she who had been so magnificent in her own village costume. He smiled gently to himself as he remembered her lumbering figure in court.

And so they reached the crest of the hill where, little over three months before, he had first glimpsed Sintzi on his way from the house in Belodor to take refuge with Zhivko Trifounatz.

That had been in late spring; it was now mid-autumn.

The morning sun, a clear morning, was flooding the rolling expanse before them. The meadows were burned brown, the stubble fields were ashy yellow, the maize, in great reaches, was a sea of dull brown and gold, the leaves of the copses were beginning to turn. But the early morning sun – it was not more than an hour after sunrise – with its liquid light

made the dry autumn air breathe with another greenness than that easy greenness of spring.

They turned off the highroad along the edge of the woods, and it seemed a dream, in its repetition of that other morning, this mockery of a last journey.

At last they stopped, a few yards from a fresh-dug grave, in which was firmly planted a rough-trimmed stake, the body of which, where the lopping hatchet had slithered off a slice of bark, glistened with its smooth sap, still undried. Petty formalities, Artanovitch noticed, followed him to the very edge of the grave, and when, having got the reading of this, that, and the other over, they had brought him up to the grave, they carefully removed the handcuffs, to substitute cord for them. And the thought flashed through his mind that no doubt a vote for this cord was included in their code of laws, whereas handcuffs had to serve again and again until they were worn out. They could not be buried with him, and they would not take handcuffs from his dead body – ugh! it was all too small and ridiculous for a man to bear.

One of the gendarmes, with quick, practised fingers, clenched one of his wrists to the bone as he knotted the cord, and was already taking the other. Artanovitch looked round him. A cordon of gendarmes, rifles, bayonets, glistening in the morning sun, and through the sapling copse of those glistening blades beyond he could see the open country. He looked nearer – the pompous priest, like a mockery of a man made to scare crows; the cadaverous doctor, fingering the stethoscope in his pocket; the solemn, self-righteous, black-coated officials. He could not bear it. For an instant his spirit failed him, and the indignity was more than he could bear.

With a great roar he broke from the gendarmes' hands, the cord dangling loose from his wrist, swung round, snatched a

revolver from one of the gendarmes' belts, and with great loping strides, stiffly with one leg, dashed at the cordon of bayonets. In their blank surprise the men broke their line before the enraged giant, Bloody Nicholas of evil fame charging them with brandished revolver; and before they had time to collect themselves he was thirty yards away, towards the woods. The few score curious onlookers, Sintzi peasants – Zhivko, Lentchitch, the whole reeking heap of them, – scattered like scraps of paper in a gale.

And then his spirit conquered again. Was he, Nicholas Artanovitch, who feared no man and had never made but that one mistake, with Militza Trifounatz, was he to run, to be ignominiously shot in the back, was he to show that he feared death? He stopped short, spun round and faced them all, drawn to his magnificent height, towering in the sun above them as he stood, with a background of the Blasco woods, higher on the slope than they.

'Come on,' he roared, 'come on, you mean cravens, you cowardly louts! Here I am. Take me!'

They had been already in chase, rifles and revolvers ready, as he ran; but now when he stopped so suddenly and turned to face them caution, fear, habit commanded them; and they stopped dead, and did not move an inch, literally too afraid to step towards him. In one last triumph, on the hilltop, his eyes far away beyond Sintzi whither that fateful late May morning he had planned to pass, he held the lot of them at bay; and saw that they were afraid of him. It was enough. He flung the revolver far away, but still, for an age, it seemed, – really but for a few seconds, – they did not move.

'Then must I come to you?' he cried, spreading his arms wide – though whether he spoke to the vast country before him, or the sun, or his executioners, nobody could tell.

'Ah-h-h!' he cried again, 'Militza, *ovako neshto netchesh ti*

nikad dozhiveti!' which is to say, 'Ah, Militza, such a moment as this you shall never live to know!'

And a few minutes later the doctor bent with his stethoscope over a limp, bleeding figure that had crumpled up at the foot of the stake on the damp, fresh-opened clay of the grave; and the gendarmes with shovels were standing ready to finish their work, with slightly puzzled faces.

THE MURDER

(See footnote, page 42)

Not death. A small loving wind
lapped the loose summits of the trees
when the hot darkness fell, and filled
the field; and all beyond was still.

Beneath the shelter of the hedge
he watched her body in the grass;
saw in the gloom about her hand
the busy march of eager ants.

There, in the atmosphere of hay,
against the gnats that gathered round
found his pipe and softly breathed
the smoke, and stared beyond the trees.

The match had flickered in her face;
head hung, for she was dead;
white the bruised neck; and all her flesh
already dull when gently pressed.

It had surprised, she did not scream,
had stared in fear with reaching eyes
to-and-fro following his that hid
while she choked beneath his grip.

Although (enquiringly, of course)
he spied to see her features change
in death; or veins, or tongue
tell, thick, the thing was done.

At last; and struggling limbs grew limp,
the croaking less, the eyes more pale;
his thumbs ached, he panted in fear
to weaken, fool, with death so near.

And then the end, this thing a life
no more a life, with sagging head
let drop on the grass, and muscles free
as everybody's are to be.

Not death. The warm summer twilight
lay about the twitching corpse –
and many roving evenings rose,
theirs again, a summer grove.

His fingers on his cramping knees,
he knelt there while he thought; and flowed
upon deep rivers to the hayfield
and weariness and last day.

All that he ever knew lay hid
behind those open filmy eyes,
and all he might ever know he knew:
the month, the day – confused grew

memories, forgotten, lost,
thin trifles of disdain; tried
all the ways and back no way –
and he obeyed. How black, till dawn

no moon, the night! How small, compared,
she dead, the world, with all the world!
One night, all nights and all the days
wrapped him for ever in a haze

not death. A thing soon ended lay
to spurn upon a night of June
on a grass bed, as she again
and had again – had loving lain.

By the author of this book :

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